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William Gillette and the stage of enterprise

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WILLIAM GILLETTE AND THE STAGE OF ENTERPRISE

A Dissertation Presented

By

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June 1974

This dissertation is dedicated

TO MY BELOVED MOTHER, LUCY MAXWELL,

AND TO

MY FATHER, WILLIAM H. MAXWELL,

whose mind and memories
are responsible for its existence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My first debt is to my father and mother, William H. and Lucy Maxwell, to whom this dissertation is dedicated. My second is to my aunt, Louise Ann Maxwell. The memories of that gay and gallant lady made the stage of another day more real to me than any book has ever done.

My husband, Professor Harry J. Marks of the University of Connecticut, has not read this dissertation. But I have never had another teacher with so broad and deep a grasp of historical forces, as many of his other students will also testify. His concepts of the Pivotal Period underlie all that I have written here. My father, who graduated from the fourth grade and had a profound understanding of his own time, and my learned and scholarly husband, have been my greatest teachers.

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Since the publication of Sherlock Holmes and Much More in 1970, all research on William Gillette must start with the work of Miss Doris E. Cook of the Connecticut Historical Society. I would like to acknowledge my own great debt to her.

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Finally, I want to express my gratitude for the personal sacrifices, warm support, and great skill of Mrs. Charlotte B. Ritchie, who typed this manuscript.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the life and career of the actor and playwright, William Gillette, as a culture hero who represented the values and interests of legitimate theatre audiences in his time. It is an attempt to explain what there was about Gillette and his work which made him appealing to late nineteenth century audiences.

Gillette's entire career on the stage covered the years from 1873 to 1936, but his greatest success was in the 1880's and 1890's. His rise in popularity accompanied the growth of population, cities, big business, technology, and leisure in the United States.

The dissertation takes the position that Gillette's audiences were composed largely of members of the increasing middle class. During the late nineteenth century, they wanted plays which represented their values of honor, "wholesomeness," gentlemanliness, respectability, belief in "science," and exaltation of the individual--presented in an entertaining manner. They also wanted American drama performed with technical skill and with a resemblance to "reality" in terms of visible objects, as they conceived it.

Gillette was able to supply what legitimate theatre spectators sought at the time of his greatest success because of his background and personal characteristics. He was a descendant of Puritans brought up in a genteel New England family with romantic ideals and strong belief in individual worth and the expansion of the nation. He showed from childhood a great interest in the new technology and developed skills as a craftsman. He had influential connections and qualities of persistence, willingness to work, intense activity, and reserves of humor which enabled him to take advantage of chances for success and moneymaking in his time. He was very successful as a writer of comedy but achieved his greatest popularity in melodramas centering about the figure of a masterful individual as in his greatest success, Sherlock Holmes. His plays gave both him and his audiences an opportunity to escape from stress and at the same time demonstrated the movement and vitality of a nineteenth century period of growth.

Gillette's decline as a playwright occurred when the middle class showed signs of change to which he was unable to adapt. In the twentieth century, legitimate theatre audiences split into a variety of segments.

The concept of "reality" changed. Some elements wanted a drama of broader social significance than Gillette was able to supply with his focus upon the individual and the theatre as the business of entertainment. Others wanted deeper psychological probing than his genteel background permitted. Another segment could get its superficial entertainment from a new medium in motion pictures.

Gillette remained a celebrated actor who had pioneered in realistic techniques and his great personal charm survived for some portions of his old audience. But, as his life ended, he obtained greatest satisfaction from creating illusions at his Castle in Connecticut.

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INTRODUCTION

The story of William Gillette's life and career as a successful American actor and playwright is part of the story of the growth of the nation in the last half of the nineteenth century. It reflects the influences of population increases, urbanization, technological progress, and the spread of big business. Gillette's success was tied to the expansion of the urban middle class which accompanied these developments. With improvements in transportation and communication and growth of a national theatrical monopoly, this class set the standards for the legitimate stage throughout the country.

Gillette was born in the middle of the century, and his period of greatest popularity as a playwright was during the 1880's and 1890's. He reached a peak as the nineteenth century was ending, and, after 1899, wrote no new successful plays. The focus of this dissertation, therefore, is on the years of his greatest popularity. Preliminary chapters attempt to explain conditions in the country and the theatre and factors in his personal background which led to his success. The final chapters trace his later years and his decline

as a working dramatist, although his fame as an actor and revivals of old plays continued into the twentieth century.

During a career that covered sixty-three years, Gillette passed through a number of stages which reflect both his own personality and the values and desires of his audiences. Entering the theatre in 1873, he served a seven-year apprenticeship, acting in many different kinds of parts before making his debut as a professional playwright. From the time of his first successful play until the end of the century, he appeared almost exclusively in comedies and melodramas which he wrote himself or adapted from foreign plays. The fact that he wrote his own parts makes study of Gillette's plays particularly revealing both of his own personality and of what interested the audiences he tried to reach.

Gillette believed that an actor must use his own personality on the stage, that, in fact, he cannot get away from it. With considerable vehemence, he insisted upon being himself as an actor, refusing to become what he called a "lightning-change artist."[1] This did not

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[1]William Gillette, "The Illusion of the First Time in Acting," Papers on Acting, ed. by Brander Matthews (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958), 134-35; "A Great Actor's Explanation of the Decay of Acting," Current Opinion, LVII (December, 1914), 406.

mean, however, that he was always the same upon the stage, as suggested by those who stereotype him in his most famous role of "Sherlock Holmes." In a variety of roles, he used different elements of his personality. The trajectory of his parts reveals, in fact, a history of his personal development, although there was in most of them an underlying humor always characteristic of him as a person. In the parts he wrote for himself, Gillette was a comic artist until he reached middle age.

As a youthful playwright-actor, he presented an absurd figure. He was, in reality, impressionable, sensitive, and nervous, and in need of reassurance and protection. At a time when they were particularly noticeable, he used these qualities to portray comic roles like his lovable, absent-minded "Professor" and helpless, ridiculous "Private Secretary," constantly committing social gaucheries and becoming the butt of the other characters' wit. The role of the nervous and awkward young man was familiar both to himself and to members of his middle class audiences. This was not all of Gillette's personality, even at the time he played these roles, but it was a part of him of which he made use during the early stages of his career and remained with him when he projected other images.

In his second stage, Gillette made use of the clever manipulator gasping at the success of his own tricks which was another aspect of his personality. When he wrote this kind of part for himself, he was in mid-career. He had achieved considerable success in manipulating audiences, partially through his use of new stage technology and his willingness to calculate chances and take risks despite attacks of acute anxiety. Like his characters of the Civil War correspondent, "Thomas Beane," in Held by the Enemy, and the insouciant attorney, "Augustus Billings" of Too Much Johnson, he could put on a bold face and pretend nonchalance. With Gillette, they lived by their wits and survived by taking advantage of opportunities. It was a role recognizable to men of the Gilded Age who were trying to seize the main chance and capitalize upon it.

In the final stage of his success, after he had reached middle age, Gillette became the romantic image of the masterful individual and elegant, sophisticated gentleman. This was his role as "Captain Thorne," the cool Northern spy of Secret Service, and as the omnicompetent "Sherlock Holmes" in his most successful play. In reality, Gillette's career had demonstrated

that he was a man of intelligence, self-discipline, and determination, all qualities of "Thorne" and "Holmes." He was also, as someone once put it, "a gentleman born,"[2] a W A S P of exceedingly patrician appearance who numbered men of genuine distinction among his ancestors. Members of his audience would like to have been the transcendent individual and gentleman he represented. But Gillette was also still, in part, the nervous, sensitive, and appealing young man he had been in his first parts. There was an element of both wish-fulfillment and of mockery of both himself and the audience in his portrayal of sophisticated roles. Somehow, Gillette could not quite stand the idea of being grand.

As a practical man of the theatre, Gillette regarded his work as the business of interesting and pleasing audiences.[3] This was a common attitude in the late nineteenth century, not only for businessmen like his producer, Charles Frohman, but also for other stage

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[2]Boston Herald, obituary editorial, April 30, 1937 (New York Public Library Theatre Collection).

[3]William Gillette, Papers on Playmaking, ed. by Brander Matthews (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958), 80.

personalities.[4] Even the independent actress, Minnie Maddern Fiske, who defied big business commercialization, agreed with Gillette's explicit insistence that the audience is the appropriate judge of plays.[5] Another popular American dramatist of the period, Bronson Howard, warned aspiring playwrights that they must work within their audiences' mental and moral framework and must not try to go beyond it.[6] Neither Gillette nor Howard, who both had reputations for the highest personal integrity, regarded this requirement for success as in any way degrading to themselves. Entertaining and not instructing audiences was their job, and they prided themselves on doing it well.[7]

With attitudes like these, successful actors and playwrights produced a drama which can be understood as disclosing existing audience standards and interests. Gillette and others spoke of playwriting as holding a mirror up to "Nature"--a traditional theatrical

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[4]Otis Skinner, Footlights and Spotlights (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1923-24), 282, 286; E. H. Sothern, The Melancholy Tale of Me (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), 365-66.

[5]Archie Binns, Mrs. Fiske and the American Theatre (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1955), 218, 310-11.

[6]Bronson Howard, "The Autobiography of a Play," Playmaking, ed. by Matthews, 22-42.

[7]Jack Poggi, Theatre in America (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966), 279.

expression. When he used this expression, Gillette explained that he was referring to human nature and speaking of the drama as a reflection of the people of the time in which it was presented.[8]

The people of the time to whom he was appealing were (1) members of the older middle class who had, by the 1880's, recently discarded former prejudices against the theatre, and (2) newcomers who had acquired some affluence and social position with the expansion of industry, business, technical skills, and bureaucracy.

The plays Gillette wrote and the images which he presented as an actor reveal his audiences' focus upon the individual as the center of action--and, in fact, of the world. Most middle class men of the late nineteenth century did not see life either in social and economic or in modern psychological terms. They regarded dramatic conflict as a battle between the individual and visible external forces or between the individual and his conscience. There was no doubt about what was "right." Cracks were beginning to appear and the European dramatists, Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw, were attracting some attention by the

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[8]Gillette, "Illusion of the First Time," Acting, ed. by Matthews, 128.

1890's. But very few American theatre-goers were interested in social problems or subjective depth-probing. One American playwright, James A. Herne, made a serious and determined effort to draw attention to significant moral questions about what was "right" and failed in his attempt.[9]

Gillette himself introduced some element of psychological realism into Civil War melodramas in which characters were confronted with a choice between loyalty to individuals and to their country. Audiences of his period were able to accept this conflict between two recognized standards. But they were unwilling to allow him to raise questions about the basis of their world when he wrote a play about the spiritual crisis of Mrs. Humphrey Ward's Robert Elsmere. The play was written after Gillette had experienced a personal crisis of faith while he was suffering through a long period of despair following the death of his deeply-loved wife. It was a flop. With his creed of entertainment, Gillette made no further attempt to raise questions about the nature of life on the stage.

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[9]Garff B. Wilson, Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), 229-33; Lloyd Morris, Curtain Time (New York: Random House, 1953), 268-69.

The fundamental moral standards in Gillette's plays remained the ideas of honor, gentility, and personal loyalty which he and his audiences both accepted. His work was praised by critics as "wholesome" and "decent." Gentlemen might say "damn" but were never obscene; ladies were spirited but models of decorum; and there was romantic attachment but no sex.

In comedy, Gillette's plays presented a sunny world in which problems were contrived and susceptible to disappearance. In melodrama also, problems could be solved to the satisfaction of playwright and audience.

The playwright and his audiences were alike in failing to see or turning away from increasing stresses in their society like widening extremes of wealth and poverty, closing off of the West, and labor violence. Gillette was either blind to social stress or too busy during the years of his success to think about what was happening in his society. But he knew that the problems he offered in his plays were not reality but a game. He openly suggested that audiences share his fun and escape into illusion with him.[10] In the

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[10]Norman Hapgood, The Stage in America (New York: Macmillan Company, 1901), 51, 78; Walter Prichard Eaton, "William Gillette's Return to the Stage," Sherlock Holmes Souvenir Program (November, 1929), 12.

history of the stage, there was nothing new about offering escape from both inner and outward stresses.

From the point of view of the late twentieth century, Gillette now seems "Old Guard," both in the values his plays represent and in his methods of playmaking. But, seen against the background of the theatre as he found it in the early 1870's, he made contributions to the modernization of the stage. When Gillette, the gentleman, came to the stage, men of the theatre had a bad reputation, and representatives of the "respectable" classes were a minority in audiences. Gillette contributed to the movement to make the theatre "respectable" and acceptable to the middle class.

When he came to the stage, much acting was still in the old "grand manner"--stagy, exaggerated, stilted and unnatural. He applied the nineteenth century middle standard of the visible world as reality to an American theatre that was either wildly romantic or crudely provincial. His plays had the vitality--the emphasis upon action and movement--of the crude American plays of the past. But he made them acceptable to middle class spectators by presenting characters they recognized speaking as they would speak in settings which they

understood. He had mechanical interests and aptitudes which equipped him to take advantage of new lighting developments and devices to give the appearance of resemblance to life, as understood by his middle class spectators.

In addition, he applied sophisticated standards of dramatic construction. He wrote plays built with painstaking care in preparation of situations and with more believable development than American dramas of the past.

With the twentieth century, however, the need to make theatre "respectable," wholesome, decent, genteel, and logical passed away. Gillette was forty-seven years old when the century turned, and his productive period was ended. It soon became clear that the attitudes and habits which had made him a nineteenth century pioneer were changing. He had emerged at a time when the individual was glorified as a star and had been promoted by the monopoly Theatrical Syndicate. As a person, he had been willing to take risks, apply discipline, order and hard work, and adopt a philosophy which made him successful in his period.

A different generation of audiences in the twentieth century did not want what he had to offer. And he could not adapt attitudes and habits fixed in the nineteenth century to the requirements of another time. The legitimate theatre which was in its heyday during the period of his greatest success began to fragment into a variety of elements. Some twentieth century spectators looked at the world in a different way from the nineteenth century concept of visible reality. They wanted social, economic, or subjective drama. Others were interested in entertainment with more emphasis upon sex or high society than the reticent Gillette was able to offer. There was a segment which sought release from problems in the movies and its new stars. By the early twentieth century, the great age of the legitimate theatre which Gillette had helped to introduce was past.

William Gillette was not a great dramatist who wrote plays of lasting literary value, and he never had any idea that he was. "The dramatic trap that would work like a charm not long ago may not work today," he once said; "the successful trap of today may be useless junk tomorrow."[11]

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[11]Gillette, Playmaking, ed. by Matthews, 80-81.

Gillette believed that the drama has life only when it is on the stage and that "no one on earth can read a play."[12] It was his purpose and practice to concentrate upon action and visual effects and not upon verbal eloquence. When asked in the 1930's to supply a sample of his work, he wrote ". . . I am not a poet architect painter philosopher or literary man and there is nothing in plays I have written that has value off the stage."[13]

With all of his insistence that a play has limited life, some of Gillette's comedies are hilarious today and there are scenes in his melodramas which can still be felt as gripping theatre when read with his meticulous acting directions. Since he never tried to be a literary wit, they are, however, difficult to quote and the plots and motivation seem incredible now.

The principal value of studying Gillette today is in his revelation of the attitudes of the audiences to whom he appealed and in the continued fascination of his own personality. Yale University Professor William

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[12]Gillette, "Illusion of the First Time," Acting, ed. by Matthews, 129-30.

[13]William Gillette to Mrs. William Vanamee, May 6, 1933 (American Academy of Arts and Letters, 633 West 155th St., New York City).

Lyon Phelps described Gillette as one of the most charming men he had ever known.[14] The charm of his personality--his playful humor, boyish appeal, and image as a gentleman of the past--lingers beyond his historical period.

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[14]William Lyon Phelps, New York Times, May 1, 1937.

C H A P T E R I

CHILDHOOD AT NOOK FARM

When William Gillette was born in 1853, a dynamic and restless nation was building industry, spreading into the West, adding to its population, and preparing for the Civil War. In the year of his son's birth, Francis Gillette was a candidate for Governor of Connecticut on a platform calling for "Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Labor and Free Men." It was a year of angry rumblings of the conflict over extending slavery into the territories, heated discussion of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, and threatening signs of the split in the Union.[1]

Gillette was born on the outskirts of Hartford, a small but growing business and manufacturing city tooling up for the battles ahead by establishing a great munitions industry. Hartford was doubling its population in the decade of his birth, although the city retained much of the atmosphere of a little marketing town. Irish immigrants were re-supplying the heavy labor pool while Connecticut Yankees came in from the farms to be trained as skilled workers in firearms factories or as clerks in the growing insurance business.[2]

Gillette's father had joined the growing numbers converging on the city in the year before his son's birth.

He had moved his family from a village north of Hartford where Gillettes had been farmers since 1636. William's ancestors on his father's side were originally French Huguenots who had migrated to Connecticut from Massachusetts with English Puritan followers of the Rev. Thomas Hooker. Poor health had forced his father back to the family farm after graduation from Yale College as a member of Phi Beta Kappa and valedictorian of the class of 1829. Frustrated in his desire to practice law and inspired by the moral reform movement of his period, Francis Gillette had become a prominent political figure in the state. As a champion of abolition, temperance, and public education, he had often been a losing candidate of minority parties.[3]

Gillette's mother, Elisabeth Hooker Gillette, was a descendant of the Rev. Thomas Hooker. His ancestors on her side had lived in another village near Hartford where Hookers had settled after the Puritan leader's death. They had been ministers, sea captains, teachers, lawyers, and farmers, and respected leaders of their community.[4]

In 1852, Francis Gillette had sold his family farm and had joined his wife's brother, Atty. John Hooker, in the purchase of property at the edge of Hartford. Because of its location in the nook or bend of a small

river, the property was known as Nook Farm. It was a beautiful stretch of fields, woods, and hillocks rolling away from a bluff above the river. Gambling on expansion of the city, the new owners planned to break most of the land into building lots while Francis Gillette continued to farm part of it.[5]

For several years after William's birth, July 24, 1853, the Gillettes lived in the farmhouse on the property. He was the youngest member of a family of four brothers and one sister. The other children were between eleven and seventeen years older than he was, and he was the last child of middle-aged parents.[6]

While his youngest son was a baby, in 1854-55, Francis Gillette served an interim term as a fanatically anti-slavery United States Senator. The State Legislature sent him to the Senate after the Kansas-Nebraska Act had aroused fears of the loss of free Western soil among Connecticut citizens who cared very little about free black men.[7]

When William was almost four years old, the Gillettes moved out of the farmhouse into their own substantial new home built on a bluff above the Nook Farm river. Their house was much simpler and more staid in design than the American Gothic marvel of brick and wood

exuberantly decorated with a scroll saw which the John Hookers had constructed earlier.[8]

During William's early childhood, the farm proved to be a profitable business for his family. As economic individualists like most of their countrymen, Francis Gillette and John Hooker were able to take advantage of the continued vigorous growth of the little city and the nation. They sold lots to residents able to build large and comfortable homes on one side of the property and used land beyond a hill for workers' housing some distance away.[9]

Building was going on all during the boy's childhood, but Nook Farm retained a secluded and pastoral atmosphere. Construction proceeded under the shade of great old trees, and new residents surrounded their spacious homes with lawns and gardens. In the early days of its development, Gillette's father called the farm "a Paradise of Earth."[10]

William's parents and other Nook Farmers were ardent Romantics who worshipped Nature and sentimentalized little children. They encouraged the boy and his Hooker cousins to play in the woods and fields and to find out about plants and animals. Gillette could call his middle-aged mother to come into the garden to look at a mud-turtle in the pond. His sister, who was a young lady fifteen years older, took her small brother into

the woods to find hepaticas and trailing arbutus. If mother and sister were absent, his father watched over him, writing his wife when the boy was four, "Willy says 'tell Mama that I love her very much and want her to come home so that I can see her.' The dear boy is very happy at his play all the livelong day."[11]

Under the influence of a literary atmosphere which produced sentimental domestic novels and the cloying poetry of Hartford's own Lydia Huntley Sigourney, the Gillettes idealized pure women and mother love. William's father wrote rhetorical and romantic poetry to his wife. He once said that he turned to her "as the house plant turns its shooting stalks and green leaves eagerly towards the window to drink the genial light."[12]

Gillette's mother appears to have been a gentle, cheerful, and comfortable woman. Her letters written while he was a boy indicate that she was interested in her family, housekeeping, and visiting in the neighborhood. Like her other children, William called her "darling little mother."[13]

His father was a grave man with formal and courtly manners who was in his fifties while William was still a small boy. Age may have been the reason for the fact that his youngest son does not seem to have felt as

emotionally close to him as the older children were. Francis Gillette was the authority figure in the household but gave William and his brothers considerable freedom. They were not afraid of him, although they treated him with respect.[14]

The boy's three much older brothers were all ambitious and restless fellows eager to get out and test themselves in a rapidly moving society. While he was still very young, his oldest brother, Frank, went off to California. Another brother, Robert, followed a sea captain uncle to China on a merchant ship. And the third brother, Edward, attended an agricultural college in up-state New York before migrating to Iowa. Although far away, they all stayed in close communication with the family. The only one who did not come home again was Frank--dead in the West at the age of twenty-three.[15]

When his oldest brother died, William Gillette was still a small boy energetically riding farm horses, whittling in wood, and playing with cats and other children at Nook Farm. He began early to entertain by taking landscape paintings off the walls of the Gillette house and fitting them into boxes to be used as scenic backdrops. The show went on in the family living room. When his aunt, Isabella Beecher Hooker, was away and her son was ill, she sent instructions "to get Willie

over to amuse him."[16]

Members of the Nook Farm community, including "Willie," were constantly visiting one another. The boy's uncle, John Hooker, wrote of the early days on the farm that "we lived like a little society by ourselves--each of us making free of each other's houses and each keeping open house. . . ." The adult residents frequently gathered for a social evening "or to welcome some friendly visitor, often some person distinguished in political, literary, or philanthropic life, who had come to some of our houses," Hooker said.[17]

Like the Gillettes and Hookers, the early residents were all descendants of Puritan settlers of New England. They were members of the Hartford "gentry"--professional and literary people of superior education who were civic leaders with strong moral convictions. Although often hard put to keep up a style of life which included frequent trips to Europe, they were better off than most of their neighbors.[18]

Residents of the farm were continually scribbling novels, verses, articles. Some served on committees to advance temperance, public education, or the Republican Party. Others prepared abolitionist speeches or sermons.[19]

Among Gillette's neighbors as a boy were some men and women who were nationally famous when they came to Nook Farm and others who were to become so. The links which brought them to the farm exhibited the close relationships of New England intellectual groups. Gillette's uncle was married to Isabella Beecher Hooker, a state and national leader in the women's rights crusade. She brought to Nook Farm her half-sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of Uncle Tom's Cabin and other novels. John Hooker brought his law partner, Joseph R. Hawley, an active founder of the Republican Party who was to become governor of the state, a United States Senator, and part-owner of the Hartford Courant. Hawley invited his college friend, Charles Dudley Warner, who was also an attorney but preferred writing novels and essays and editing national magazines and Hartford newspapers.[20]

Like William's father, all of these men and women were originally Christian perfectionists inspired by a zeal to wipe away the "sin" of slavery and other worldly evils. They had a romantic vision of a society in which all individuals would be free, happy, and morally pure. As Gillette's father put it, they felt a mission to devote themselves to "the grand object of making the world better and happier."[21]

Nook Farmers were devout Congregationalists, and William Gillette's father had helped to found the neighborhood church where the boy worshipped with his family. They mingled at this church with other members of the Hartford "gentry"--professional men, old merchant families, and manufacturers of Puritan descent. The Sunday School had picnics in a part of Nook Farm known as "Gillette's Woods."[22]

When young Gillette was eight years old, the Civil War exploded at Fort Sumter. His father had been hiding escaped slaves in the barn behind the family house and had helped to form the Republican Party in Connecticut. Now, Francis Gillette could hardly contain himself as he waited impatiently for the Emancipation Proclamation.[23]

In Hartford, William Gillette could see troops assembling in the city streets and the Samuel Colt and other firearms factories making guns. His brother, Robert, came home from the sea and Francis Gillette helped him to get a commission as a captain in the Union Army.[24]

Genuinely patriotic as they both were, William's father and John Hooker foresaw new Western expansion after the conflict. Deciding upon another speculation in the country's growth, they purchased shares in a company holding thousands of acres of Iowa land. William's brother, Edward, went out there to oversee

the property and ride around the countryside, arguing bitterly with Copperheads.[25]

At home, William was left with his aging parents when his sister married Charles Dudley Warner's brother, George Henry, in 1864 and went to live in Cincinnati. Shortly before she left, Lilly took him on a stagecoach to visit relatives in Sturbridge, Massachusetts. Lilly reported to her mother that "Willy" was somewhat disappointed to find that the children of the Massachusetts household were still in school and unable to play with him. However, she said, "he gets along very well with the kittens & birch bark stripping & Robinson Crusoe. He gave a sort of sigh when he found it wasn't vacation here, & said well--he was glad the kittens didn't have to go to school." From Cincinnati, she sent him affectionate notes, and "Willy" sent her pressed hepaticas from the home woods.[26]

When he was eleven years old, someone took a photograph of "Willy." He was then a sturdy, stocky boy in a rumpled frock-coat and heavy boots. With a slightly quizzical expression on his face, he looked directly into the camera.[27]

He was still very busy on the farm, where he had a companion in his cousin, Edward Beecher Hooker, who was about the same age as William. They were both

ardent baseball fans and liked to sketch and collect stamps together. Sometimes, they played with a younger boy named Richard Burton, the son of a Congregationalist minister who lived on Nook Farm. William spent some of his time doing chores on the part of the property which his father continued to maintain as a farm.[28]

Only three months before the war ended in 1865, the family received word that Robert was dead. He had been invalided out of the Army after the Battle of Antietam and had re-enlisted in the Navy after spending some time at home. He was killed when Fort Fisher, North Carolina, blew up after Navy bombardment. In a letter found in his trunk after his death, Robert had told his father that he hoped he would be able to "keep cool under whatever dangers I may be placed."[29]

To his eleven-year-old brother, Robert became the model of a hero. He was the brave and gallant man determined to test himself and to remain poised under the most trying circumstances. The real-life model of his hero brother made an extremely deep and lasting impression upon William Gillette.[30]

William's father was shattered by the death of a second son at twenty-three, the age at which Frank had also died. Lilly came home to console her parents, bringing her husband to stay at Nook Farm. But Francis Gillette never really recovered after the war and

Robert's death. He remained morose and taciturn, brooding over his "noble boy" and keeping the fragmented watch found beside Robert's shattered body as his most precious possession for the rest of his life. Although he was still active in the causes of temperance and free education, his public activities diminished when the abolitionist crusade ended. With much of the Nook Farm land sold, he accelerated the erosion of his capital with business loans to Edward and a gift of land to Lilly for a splendid new house on Nook Farm. He was forced to mortgage his remaining property and was increasingly troubled by debts.[31]

The effect of the father's problems upon William is not immediately clear. As a teenager, he was a tense and nervous boy troubled by occasional digestive disturbances who took an unusual pleasure in working by himself. But he was also curious, active, full of fun, and a leader in his small society. He enjoyed playing with other boys although his cousin complained about his going off alone "to work on some new wonder of his."[32]

When he was twelve years old in the year following the Civil War, young Gillette produced his own newspaper. He called the paper Hail Columbia and made "Liberty and Union" its slogan. In twelve somewhat irregular issues,

he ran patriotic stories, sentimental poetry, baseball scores, and articles on such subjects as the benefits of "Athletic Sports" and neighborhood baseball games. Most of the issues featured jokes, conundrums, and comic stories, which seemed to be the editor's greatest interest. But there were also contributions from the customarily indulgent elders of Nook Farm--Charles Dudley Warner, his father and sister, and his surviving brother, Edward, as a correspondent from Iowa. Gillette exhibited an early hard-headed business sense by charging one dollar a year for a subscription and by job printing hand bills, circulars, visiting cards, and pamphlets on the press. A sense of craftsmanship was also evident in his apology for the sloppy printing of the first issue and a great typographical improvement in subsequent copies.[33]

In a period of increasing industrialization, the boy was fascinated by mechanical "wonders." As the Central and Union Pacific raced to complete the transcontinental railroad, he yearned to become a locomotive engineer. After hanging about Hartford's railway terminal and making a careful study of the locomotives in the round house, he built three engines by himself and ran a little train around Nook Farm.[34]

In his attic workroom at the top of the Gillette house, the boy experimented with wood and carpentry. He made small wooden objects like a trowel for his nephew. And he was very proud of a combination desk and book case which he fashioned for his own use.[35]

The attic workroom was also a place where Gillette as a teenager studied, read, and wrote. Although he was by no means a studious boy in an academic sense, he read Dickens, Milton, and Shakespeare. When his sister went to Denmark during a lengthy trip to Europe in 1870, he told her: "If you see the grand, beautiful, sublime Hamlet, or any of his relations or anywhere he has been, or any place he has seen--regard them with the deepest veneration and love for the sake of your loving brother Will." He enjoyed experimenting with words, sometimes writing a kind of crazy gobbledygook to amuse himself and other boys.[36]

The attic was frequently the scene of amateur theatricals in which Gillette led troupes of young people from the neighborhood. As a director, he never bullied or patronized smaller children, according to a younger boy who was a member of his casts.[37]

When Gillette was sixteen, he created a puppet theatre for his own entertainment and the neighborhood's. He manipulated his images with strings and sang parts

from behind the scenes. Gillette had some knowledge of music, since he took piano lessons with other Nook Farm children. Experience with drawing humorous sketches probably helped him to design his puppet figures.[38]

His next venture in entertainment was a comic skit which he called Bullywingle the Beloved. For this, he visualized a figure which his mother described as having a "very red face--spectacles--old hat on--white mustache." After two years in gestation, Bullywingle went before a public of fellow students in the Hartford Public High School hall Oct. 3, 1872. Gillette described his play on the program as "Lord brandenraggamuffinwell's Great Half-Hour creation, in one act (which has had a run of 60 miles an hour, for over 1,729,865,400,000 miles successive nights Sundays suspected)." The reference to "Sundays suspected" was to the insistence of God-fearing men in the period that no theatrical performances should profane the Sabbath. Bullywingle's principal characters were a curmudgeonly old fellow played by "the exaggerated old tragedian, W. H. Gillette" and "A charming young lady in search of her father or any other man."[39]

The "exaggerated old tragedian" was back again in March 1873, at a church sociable with a repeat performance of Bullywingle and a burlesque imitation of E. A. Sothern, a famous English comic actor of the time. This was one

of a series of impersonations of well-known comedians in which Gillette specialized as a youthful performer.[40]

Although his family approved only of Shakespeare on the stage, he managed to see professional performances. Once, he tried to trick his father into giving him permission to attend a contemporary play called The Colleen Bawn by finding an old picture of Shakespeare and printing under it the legend: "William Shakespeare writing 'The Colleen Bawn.'" He got the permission but found out later that his father let him go because he admired the boy's "sublime nerve" in attempting to fool a cultivated man by making Shakespeare the author of a new play.[41]

While he was teaching himself about the stage, Gillette was attending Hartford Public High School where he was the organizer of the class "sociable" but not an outstanding academic student. In the middle of his high school career, he changed his course of study from a curriculum with heavy emphasis upon ancient languages and "the best" in literature. He shifted to a course intended for less scholarly students which made it possible to substitute modern languages for Latin and Greek and emphasized sciences and English grammar. After the shift, he ended his high school career on the honor roll. His education gave him a solid command of the structure,

spelling, and punctuation of the English language. Although he spoke and wrote idiomatically and not in his father's style of English, he was able to use words with ease and fluency.[42]

Oratory was Gillette's favorite field of study. In the post-Civil War era of flag-waving and high-sounding politicians, a required subject for all students was "special exercises in declamation." Young Gillette went about spouting Daniel Webster's speeches and entering the popular oratorical contests.[43]

A key experience in his development as an actor occurred following one of the oratory contests. As he recalled this experience later, Gillette had hurried to find his father and learn his opinion after winning first prize with an interpretation of a stirring Webster speech. Gillette respected the judgement of his father, who had a reputation of his own for eloquence. Since the speech had been on the national supremacy, he expected praise from the fanatically patriotic old partisan of the Union. But Francis Gillette did not approve of his son's performance.[44]

"Didn't I do it right?" the boy asked his father. "Right! Of course, you did it right," his father replied. "That's what's the matter with it. Do you suppose if

Webster had done it 'right' any one in the Senate would have listened to him for two minutes?"[45]

Then Francis Gillette told his son that, when Webster gave the speech, he had rushed hurriedly into the Senate in order to reply to an opponent advocating dissolution of the Union. He described Webster "all eager and uncertain, hunting for the right words, searching for the thing to say, and the strongest way to say it, hesitating, going on--." His son had reeled the oration off so that everyone would know that he had learned his lines, and had "all the correct pauses and gestures and manners and intonations," Francis Gillette said. The result was "meaningless," the former United States Senator declared.[46]

Impressed by his father's criticism, William tried to carry out Francis Gillette's ideas that performers should give the impression that the words they were saying were being said for the first time, even blundering over them occasionally. The next year, he chose another speech of Webster's for the contest and spoke in the manner his father had advised. The judges said he didn't know his lines, and some one else got the prize.[47]

By the time of his graduation from high school, however, young Gillette was the school's champion orator.

At the graduation ceremony, he took first prize in the category of "Declamations" after the judges had heard sixteen speeches. In the course of a lengthy story on the two-day ceremony, the local newspaper reported: "Mr. Gillette's oration, without disparagement to the others, was the best effort of the day, and was long and loudly applauded."[48]

Gillette, at this time, had grown out of his eleven-year-old stocky state. He was lean and angular, with a long, gaunt, hook-nosed face, black hair, and blue eyes. His height of six feet and three inches and his air of suppressed nervous energy made him stand out on the stage.[49]

C H A P T E R I I

BREAK WITH HOME

When he stood on the stage at the time of his graduation from Hartford Public High School, William Gillette had already decided to become a professional man of the theatre. He was soon to begin a period of apprenticeship which would take him far from the friendly Hartford audience and the peace and security of his Nook Farm home. After a Summer walking trip through the blue hills of western Connecticut, he was ready to start his career in Fall 1873.[1]

Young William's decision to go on the stage shocked Nook Farmers as it would have shocked any other group of respectable, church-going Americans at the time. To descendants of Puritans and members of the Hartford "gentry," the theatre seemed especially a "temple of perdition." Amateur theatricals were enjoyable and acceptable, but the professional stage was immoral and indecent.[2]

Many stars had been notorious for their drunkenness, sensational divorces, and other scandals in their lives. Decent citizens could cite as one example the famous Anglo-American dramatist, Dion Boucicault, an illegitimate child himself, who was reported to be living in sin with the actress mother of his children. Newspapers had been

full of stories about Edwin Forrest, son of a Philadelphia bank runner and most successful of all American stars, who had publicly accused his actress wife of adultery. Ministers had even refused to give actors church funeral services, according to Joseph Jefferson, the great "Rip Van Winkle," who had followed his father on the stage.[3]

The theatre was fascinating to many and had even attracted to itself a few members of the middle class. But most actors were still lower class strollers, descendants of theatrical families, or outcasts of "respectable" society. The stage seemed to Nook Farmers no place for one of their own like William Gillette.[4]

The only one of the folks at home who supported William in his decision to enter the theatre was his father, Francis Gillette. This elderly gentleman had never allowed opposition to stand in his own way. He had stood on many stages before unfriendly audiences and had shocked many genteel fellow citizens with the vehemence of his views. On both the political platform and in property speculations, he had taken his own chances. And he had accepted the choices of his other restless sons about the way in which they wanted to lead their lives.[5]

Francis Gillette drove his youngest son to the railroad station when he set out on his professional career. They spoke of his older brothers, Frank, who had gone to California, and Robert, who had gone to war. Before they got to the station, the father said: "William, you're the third son I've driven to the train like this. The others have never come home. I trust you will prove an exception."[6]

Young Gillette went to St. Louis, where he became a member of the DeBar stock company of that city and New Orleans in September 1873. Ben DeBar, the actor-manager, made yearly trips to the East to recruit replacement members of his company. It is not clear whether DeBar hired Gillette on one of these trips or whether the young man went to St. Louis by himself in search of a job. DeBar gave him work as a "utility man," a kind of jack-of-all-trades in the theatre and a position of very low status. Gillette described his salary as "nothing a week."[7]

Once Gillette had taken the step of entering the professional theatre, his family did everything it could to make his strange new life as easy as possible. His father gave him the money he needed while he served his unpaid apprenticeship. His sister's husband, George Henry Warner, was concerned that the youth

might feel that he should be independent now that he had gone his own way and urged him to accept assistance. George need not have worried about the down-to-earth common sense of his twenty-year-old brother-in-law. "I have no such idea as you fear of self-support," Gillette told George. "Father is very kind, and he knows that this is my education and of course will give me what I need to live comfortably on." George tried to give him another kind of assistance by referring him to friends in the St. Louis area. Other members of the family sent him Hartford newspapers and dried leaves and flowers from the Nook Farm woods. He received many letters from the family, including notes from his brother's small daughter, Florence Gillette.[8]

At the time that Gillette arrived in St. Louis, the city was in-between its great days as the center of steamboat traffic on the Mississippi River and its rise as a railroad and manufacturing terminal. The boy from Nook Farm felt suffocated in the big industrial city. "What comes as hard on me as almost anything else," he wrote his brother, "is to have to be shut up among these blackened walls, with nothing to walk on but brick, stone and iron, and nothing to breathe but air mixed with smoke, and several other things, and it may be added, nothing to drink but mud and water. . . ."

He was proud, however, of learning about "this great city," and wandered about the streets exploring. With a naive Easterner's superior air, he reported that the coming of Harriet Beecher Stowe to lecture and the popular Theodore Thomas to sing "makes it seem quite civilized here."[9]

Making an effort to keep himself "civilized" and to do the "right" things, he practiced on the piano in a music store, read Pilgrim's Progress, and frequented the Mercantile Library Reading Rooms. In defense of his peculiar choice of a career, he told his brother that "one of the best things about the profession is that a great deal of time is devoted to study." He also conformed to the rules he had learned at home by attending Church and Sunday School.[10]

Living first in hotels and then in a rooming house, Gillette felt very much a stranger in St. Louis. Passing the agencies of Hartford insurance companies or seeing the name of what he called "our beautiful little city" on railroad posters were "great comforts" to him, he said. "Bless old Hartford," he exclaimed at one point.[11]

Gillette was so painfully homesick that he thought of Nook Farm as "an enchanted land." Sometimes, he took imaginary walks around the farm, visiting friends and relatives. He pictured himself picking up his sister's

small children or watching his mother move cheerfully about the house, "always making the place where she is lighter, and everyone happier." "I never knew I loved you all so much though I knew I did a good deal," the young man wrote. He pleaded for letters about home to go "to a lonely boy who has been petted too much and who leans too much on his relations and who is trying to learn better, and get hardened, and become a little more independant [sic] and all that sort of thing you know.--"[12]

Although he longed for home, he was trying hard to grow up and finding the process painful. "I tell you it is just good for me to knock around this way--although it is plaguey unpleasant at times," he declared boldly. "Sometimes when I feel especially miserable, I can't help chuckling inwardly, as I reflect that every wrench I get is what I need--that is every ordinary wrench--There are wrenches that aren't so beneficial I imagine."[13]

During his first experiences in the professional theatre, Gillette probably had too much time to brood. One of his worries was his health. For a time, he was obsessed with fear of moving with the company to the theatre in New Orleans where there were annual yellow fever epidemics. His dread came close to causing him to run back home for safety. But he determined instead

not to be "babyish." Although he found his menial duties as a utility man "drudgery," he felt that he was learning something about the stage. If he left DeBar's, he knew that he could not get another job in the theatre for the same season and that, he said, "would knock my plans all to pieces for the year."[14]

Gillette's letters do not indicate that he mixed much with other members of the DeBar stock company. Members of the company were in the habit of spending their leisure time at a bar across from the theatre--hardly the place for the church-going son of the temperance candidate for Governor of Connecticut. Gillette could have had little in common with most of his fellow company members, although there is no indication that he in any way looked down upon them.[15]

Leisure was plentiful at DeBar's during the theatrical season which began in Fall 1873. Ben DeBar had begun to lose money on his previously profitable theatres at both St. Louis and New Orleans. The Panic of 1873 diminished audiences at the theatres, but this was not the basic reason for the actor-manager's problems.[16]

Gillette had happened to arrive on the stage during a period of major reorganization in theatrical business structure, playwriting, and acting. The resident stock

company system which had been the basis of the nineteenth century theatrical structure was in the process of disintegrating. Developments in the theatre allied to technological, economic, and social changes in the nation were the basic reasons for the decline.[17]

The resident stock companies scattered throughout the nation played for local and regional audiences. During the mid-nineteenth century, the people of St. Louis and New Orleans, like those of other cities in the country, had their own community theatres. They depended for dramatic entertainment largely upon community-based resident companies, as they did upon local businesses for food and other products. Visiting stars could get around the country, but travel was often slow and difficult, and the stars needed the resident companies to support them.[18]

Construction of a gigantic national railroad network, completed in 1869, brought great changes to the companies with local and regional audiences, as it did to other businesses in the country. With a railroad system linking the different parts of the nation, professional touring companies could depart from a central location and get almost anywhere. They could carry their own actors and all the necessary properties and costumes.[19]

exclusive rights in order to present plays the public wanted to see. One effect of the trend was to make it possible for the first time for a few playwrights to earn a living by doing nothing but write plays. This was beginning to attract better educated men to the playwriting profession.[21]

At the time of Gillette's entry into the theatre, these developments were still in an early state, and most performances and plays were as they had been in the past. Much of the legitimate drama consisted of the bloodier plays of Shakespeare and romantic nineteenth century European melodrama. Audiences liked soulful and sentimental English dramas and plays adapted from the French about remote and romantic figures. They reveled in lengthy and eloquent speeches on the torments of sinful men and wept for the sorrows of persecuted little children and lovers. Among favorite plays were the British Edward Bulwer-Lytton's blank verse Richelieu, set in a picturesque sixteenth century France. Other favorites were East Lynne about the sufferings of a faithless English wife and Adrienne Lecouvreur about a love-lorn eighteenth century French lady. There was also, of course, Alexandre Dumas Jr.'s daringly French Camille, cleaned up specially for the American public. Sometimes, the romantic plays featured spectacular

marvels like real horses climbing up the side of the stage, and they frequently had striking scenery of mountains, glens, and richly furnished royal antechambers.[22]

Native American plays often relied upon regional and ethnic stereotypes like the exceedingly popular frontiersman, Davy Crockett, the Indian Metamora, Last of the Wampanoags, the Down East Yankee, Solon Shingle, and the "darkies" in Uncle Tom's Cabin. Most melodramas had lessons to teach like the fabulously successful Drunkard, still going strong after almost twenty years on the stage. They featured as villains utterly evil rogues indefatigable in wicked stratagems and attacks upon family life.[23]

Comedy as well as melodrama was extremely popular, often in the form of broad farce. Audiences laughed heartily at crude jokes, raucous word play, and rough and tumble physical action. There were many successful comic artists, some of whom relied largely on pantomime. But the most successful star on the American stage was probably Miss Charlotte Crabtree, who was known to audiences all over the country as "Lotta." She was a flirtatious minx who delighted the public just by sticking her little foot between the curtains as well as by her songs, dances, and acrobatic capers.[24]

When Gillette went on the stage, the audiences at theatres like DeBar's represented a broad cross-section of the local population, with fewer members of the gentry than of other groups. Many theatres were huge and barnlike with dimly lighted stages and uncomfortable seats. The theatres had pits and top galleries where workmen and farmers huzzaed or booed. Professional and business men and clerks sat behind the pit, and a few families with some fashionable ladies sat in boxes above the stage.[25]

In the same theatres, broad audiences saw legitimate drama, farce, and opera, minstrel shows, variety acts, and song and dance. There were even occasional double features with farces following melodramas.[26]

As the country and cities grew, the variegated audiences which had watched this mélange had begun to split. There were already special theatres for the working classes in New York and other large cities. Exaggerated melodrama and song-and-dance shows were going to these proletarian theatres. Some of the upper classes were beginning to attend smaller theatres with more sophisticated fare. When Gillette entered the theatre, however, most of the many kinds of offerings were still in the same playhouses with a mixed audience.[27]

During his first experience on the stage, the stars were more important to Gillette than any one else in the theatre. He was an ardent star worshipper, asking his sister-in-law to send him clippings of stories on luminaries like the Italian tragedian, Tomasso Salvini. While he was in St. Louis, the young man was awed when he had the opportunity to see the famous American tragedian, Lawrence Barrett. "I see him from behind the scenes, so in that way I have already learned a good deal of the manners, customs, rules &c of stage life, both in rehearsal and otherwise," he reported to his family. He added of Barrett that "It is said that in Richelieu [sic] he compares very favorably with Booth." The greatest star on the American stage at the time and the one actors themselves most respected was the moody Edwin Booth.[28]

Gillette was awed by a close-up view of the stars but far from pleased by many of the performances he saw at DeBar's. He found resident company actors still stereotyped in "stock" roles. The manager hired them as "first old woman," "soubrette," "singing and walking gentleman," "villain and heavy." Theoretically, they were expected to follow their own "lines of business" in each part. Gillette had to master what he called "the tricks of the stage," during his early years in

the theatre. "We had our tragic walk, our correct and dreadful laugh, our carefully learned gestures, our shrieks and outcries and stilted voices," he once said. "We were to hope for success in so far as we mastered these rules and tricks and put force and personal vigor into our 'execution' of them."[29]

A great nineteenth century actress described the customary style of acting in America as "the stamp-and-stare-and-start-and-scream school." Some leading players in Gillette's early years still seized center stage and declaimed, drawing admiration in the measure that they could express extremes of sometimes violent emotion. Their voices rose higher as they transported audiences into uplifting or desolating climaxes. They were also in the habit of striding, leaping, and brandishing their arms, depending upon physiques of remarkable strength. In the huge and dimly-lighted theatres, they needed stentorian voices and large muscle movement in order to hold the attention of audiences. They also needed at least an apparent versatility, since their roles changed every night.[30]

The extremities of this exaggerated style of acting were undergoing some modification at the time that Gillette reached the theatre. Some of the legitimate drama audience was beginning to want more likeness to

life. Tastes were changing with the increasing success of science, medicine, and technology. This success depended upon an empirical test of truth as closeness to observable facts. The marvelous accomplishments of the empirical method were beginning to affect the way in which audiences looked at the world around them. There was a desire for performances on the stage which bore some resemblance to what men could observe in life.[31]

The application of the empirical standard to the romantic exaggeration of the traditional theatre was only beginning, however, when Gillette started his career. Stars like Booth were quieter, more thoughtful, and subtler than Edwin Forrest whom Booth replaced as the premier performer of the American stage. But Booth was also larger than life. He could not believe audiences wanted stars who acted like ordinary human beings.[32]

During his period of apprenticeship, Gillette conformed to the requirements of the stock company system. But he built up a store of observations which were to serve him in the future. Among these was the perception that audiences wanted "acting that was a nearer approach to life." He noticed that audiences were delighted when they saw a performer who forgot

to act "correctly" or liked his character so much "that he couldn't resist making him just a real person."[33]

While in St. Louis, Gillette did not have to worry about being forced to perform in a "correct" manner offensive to both his mind and his temperament. He never got a chance to play any role at all during the two months of his stay in the city as an unpaid stock company member. His chance came after the DeBar company had moved down river to its mid-winter station at New Orleans while the St. Louis theatre was rented to traveling companies.[34]

One reason for delay in casting Gillette was the fact of his unusual height. There was some difficulty in finding bit parts for a very thin and bony young man who was six feet and three inches high. His figure tended to distract the audience from stars and other actors of more important roles who were not so tall as he was. Gillette's height and physique were perfect, however, for an Indian in a crowd scene. It was as one of a crowd of Indian braves besieging a western railroad station that he made his first appearance on the professional stage.[35]

The play was Across the Continent: Or, Scenes from New York Life and the Pacific Railroad, by Oliver Doud Byron, which opened the New Orleans theatrical

season in November 1873. Across the Continent was a mixture of slapstick farce and melodrama typical of American plays popular in the period. In one vulgar potpourri, moral purpose mingled with common-sense comics, frontier figures, and ethnic stereotypes. Veering wildly from New York City slums to the Rocky Mountains, the play pleased the audience also with singing, dancing, violence, and a scene of salvation by fortuitous use of the telegraph. Byron, who had bought and rewritten the play, sprinkled the dialogue liberally with asides such as, "Oh, Heaven, do not now desert me!" But much of the conversation was colloquial.[36]

Gillette wrote home from New Orleans that he disliked "these sensational, tearing, Indian--and other--pieces, that are mostly played down here--however it is tolerable, and I think will do me good--for a while at least." He was learning what the public liked and gathering knowledge about the mechanics of stage performance. He found out how a stage was set and scenery changed, how costumes could be used to delineate character, and how lighting could dramatize a sorrowful scene. He was beginning to acquire an ability to visualize every stage movement before it was made and to produce sound and visual effects by relatively simple methods. The importance of an actor's physical movements

to the establishment of mood or the heightening of suspense made a particular impression upon Gillette.[37]

His first experience on the professional stage came to an end after less than four months. A new schedule of Sunday night stock company performances in New Orleans gave him a reason for leaving DeBar's in December 1873. The young man from a fanatically Sabbatarian home was not the only player who objected on grounds of conscience. His parents and other relatives urged him to refuse to perform on Sundays. But it is doubtful that a youth with Gillette's sense of purpose would have left for this reason alone. Although he was still religious and attended Sunday School in both St. Louis and New Orleans, his letters indicate that his real reason for leaving was that he felt that he had learned as much as he could at DeBar's.[38]

Gillette returned to Nook Farm as stage struck as he had ever been. In the Spring, he went to New York City to see his cousin off for Europe and spent the next two days following the stars from one theatre to another.[39]

In Hartford, he was very sociable, watching baseball games with other fellows, seeing "the girls," and attending amateur theatrical performances. With other young men, he rushed off to fight fires and follow the

engines when the gong sounded. Writing of one fire in a shed near a factory building, he said, "I got all mud helping get it out--got a stream on--otherwise the shop would have gone I guess. I went into it, and it was almost red hot inside."[40]

Gillette also continued his visiting around Nook Farm, sometimes stopping at a new home built there by Samuel Clemens, who was known as Mark Twain. One of Mark Twain's maids asked her mistress about the young actor. He was "the best-looking man I ever laid an eye on," she said.[41]

Mark Twain gave Gillette the opportunity he needed to return to the legitimate stage. The humorist had written a novel, The Gilded Age, with Charles Dudley Warner, the Nook Farm neighbor whose brother was married to Lilly Gillette. Clemens dramatized the novel in a play which opened in New York City in September 1874. He obtained a place for Gillette in the original cast of his satire on materialism, boosterism, and corruption in the years following the Civil War in the United States. The head of the company was John T. Raymond, a comic star of such informality that he sometimes talked to his friends from the stage. Raymond's production of The Gilded Age, originally

known as Colonel Sellers, was immediately and long successful.[42]

Gillette's role in New York was as foreman of the jury in a dramatic trial scene of the play. The part gave him his first chance to speak on the professional stage. His "entire vocal effort," as he later described it himself, consisted of replying "We have!" when asked whether the jury had reached a verdict and "Not Guilty!" when asked what it was. No critics noticed his art in speaking, but he received a salary of twelve dollars a week.[43]

During the run of the play in New York, Gillette took a scientific course at the University of the City of New York. This was his first formal education since his graduation from high school.[44]

After the New York City run, the young actor started on his first road tour. Raymond was beginning a series of road performances which were to keep him popular for years as the ultimate in the American promoter, the redoubtable "Colonel Sellers." Gillette played a variety of minor roles with the traveling company.[45]

During the 1875-76 theatrical season when he had some experience on the stage behind him, he joined the Globe Theatre company of Boston. He played small

parts in a variety of melodramas and farces, including the role of "Rosencranz" in Hamlet. His greatest success of the Boston season was in W. S. Gilbert's romance, Prince Florian.[46]

Engagement with another stock company left Gillette again with much leisure time. To improve his speaking skills, he took courses at Boston University's Monroe School of Oratory. From Boston, he wrote home that he was thinking about "the characters, their disposition, etc., in a play I will write."[47]

Some of Gillette's leisure in the Boston cultural center went into his first serious intellectual activity. He attended lectures on religions of the East, developed theories about the unreality of time, and read Goethe's Wilhelm Meister. He told George Warner, a scholarly type, that he appreciated Goethe's "immense grasp of the human mind and human nature." But, he said, "There seems to be something mysterious about it, something that cannot be put into words--which I dislike, for if I could get hold of the idea in some way, I could think about it, instead of having to wonder what it means."[48]

Gillette was pondering questions about "Hell, Heaven, Spiritualism, Future existence and all that tangle--about life--." However, he told George, he did not expect to spend much time on such speculations.

"I am not one of those," he said, "who can go to work and think as a stone crusher chews up stone."[49]

Some of his time was occupied with a young woman from Bath, Maine, whose name was Georgia Cayvan. She was a dark-haired girl five years younger than he was. When Gillette met her, she was a public reader, a branch of the dramatic profession with considerably more respectability than acting.[50]

After the Boston season, Gillette went back West again. He played with the Macauley Company of Louisville and Cincinnati during the 1876-77 and the 1877-78 theatrical seasons. The company was very similar to Ben DeBar's, although Gillette had advanced his own position to secondary roles. With the changes occurring in the theatre, both companies were about to go out of business.[51]

Gillette, nevertheless, was able to add at Macauley's to the experience he was accumulating. He had an opportunity there to act with a number of glittering stars. One of these was Edwin Booth, with whom he appeared in Hamlet as "First Player." Another was Stuart Robson, a famous "funny man" who set audiences laughing with pantomime and the use of his own eccentric and amiable character. While Robson was at Macauley's, Gillette wrote home that he liked the comic artist very

much personally. "I had a very good part in 'Everybody's Friend' /a Robson comic sketch/," he said, "and have some very good old men this week."[52]

He acted at Macauley's in one play somewhat different from the usual formulas. This was Saratoga, a comedy by Bronson Howard about a marital mixup at the fashionable resort in up-state New York. Howard was an example of the new type of playwright--the son of the former Mayor of Detroit and a well-educated and gentlemanly sort. As a playwright, he was more sophisticated and literate than most of those who had written American plays before him. He was the first American dramatist to make a profession and mounds of money out of doing nothing but writing plays.[53]

While with Macauley's, Gillette lived in a furnished room where, he said, he had "jolly old times making mush for breakfast." "I make the best mush ever known," he declared. But he was glad when an old friend came to town with the Yale Glee Club, and he could go out for a sociable meal.[54]

From Louisville, he urged Ed Hooker, studying medicine at Boston University, to visit the young public reader, Georgia Cayvan. "Go and see her and tell me all about her--how she looks--seems--is--etc.," Gillette asked his cousin. Gillette had been exchanging

letters with Georgia and pronounced her "a splendid girl."[55]

During the Summer of 1877, the young actor returned once again to his home at Nook Farm. The Hookers and Gillettes celebrated his twenty-fourth birthday at a festive breakfast in the Gillette home. The dining room was decorated with twenty-four vases of flowers contributed by both Hookers and Gillettes. Isabella and her son, Ed Hooker, sang a song with verses made up by Uncle John. They read in part:

> Will the actor
> A mighty factor
> Will be in Nook Farm's fame. . . .[56]

To entertain a Hartford audience, "Will" put on a one-man show while at home. He had a full house for an evening of light-hearted burlesque including impersonations of famous comic actors and an original skit of a bashful young man addressing a Sunday School. The hit of the evening was a caricature of Mark Twain reading "The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." The star's Nook Farm neighbor, Mark Twain, was a member of the audience.[57]

During the Summer, Gillette invited his young lady friend from Boston, Georgia Cayvan, to pay a visit at his family home. Gillette was very much in love, and the romance reached a climax at this time. He asked

Miss Cayvan to marry him and his father gave his blessing to the union in separate notes to his son and the girl. But Miss Cayvan was a stormy lady, and the engagement was broken before Gillette returned to Louisville.[58]

Back in Louisville for the 1877-78 season, the young man felt "all at sea." A new trouble came when he felt obliged to assume family financial responsibilities. His father's financial problems were increasing, and his brother, Edward Gillette, was in the midst of the farm depression in Iowa. Both a farmer and a newspaperman, Edward edited the Iowa Tribune with James Baird Weaver. He was chairman of the national committee of the Greenback Party and was elected one of eight Greenback U. S. Congressmen in 1878. "Will" Gillette felt that Edward's own family needed assistance while his brother followed Francis Gillette in crusading for his fellow man. "Will" had for years been close to Edward's wife, Sophie, who had first been engaged to his dead brother, Robert, and he was also fond of his nieces, Florence and Elisabeth Ives.[59]

In view of his family's financial problems, the young actor took an extra job when he returned to Macauley's for the 1877-78 season. Becoming Louisville correspondent for a number of newspapers, he was able

to accumulate eighty dollars which he asked his sister's husband to give to Edward in the West in as tactful a manner as possible. He also told George that he felt the rock of Nook Farm was slipping from under the feet of the family.[60]

At Macauley's in his second season, Gillette scored an outstanding success. The play was A Mother's Secret by Victorien Sardou, a French dramatist who had perfected what was called "the well-made play." More polished and sophisticated than the usual slipshod melodrama, Sardou's plays were carefully constructed to reach climaxes after preparing audiences to expect them. Gillette's chance came when Ben Macauley, the actor-manager, suddenly became ill on the night of a performance. One of his colleagues, Minnie Maddern, who was a child actress at the time, saw Gillette suddenly "catapulted" into the leading role with only one-half hour's notice. "I have never witnessed such a spectacle of abject fright as the tall young man presented," she recalled after she had become famous as Minnie Maddern Fiske. Gillette's performance was one of the great hits of the season.[61]

While he was at Macauley's, Gillette was able, in the leisure customary for stock company performers of the period, to complete a draft of his first full-length play, The Professor. This seemed to the ambitious young man much more meaningful than his success as an

actor while he was with Macauley's. He was glad, however, to feel at the time "firmly established" as an actor after some five years on the stage.[62]

In early 1878, Gillette left Macauley's to join a new road company formed by Kate Claxton, a star who was a sensational success in a French melodrama, The Two Orphans. Miss Claxton may have extended the offer while playing with the Macauley stock company in February. Gillette was now mature enough to have developed a flattering manner with women, combining a suggestion of teasing with gallant deference. He supported Miss Claxton in a variety of roles as they toured in The Two Orphans and she wandered over the stage as a sad, blind waif suffering monstrous persecutions.[63]

In joining another road company, Gillette was resuming a style of life which he had first experienced while touring with John T. Raymond in The Gilded Age. On the road, actors moved constantly from place to place in stuffy trains heated by stoves. They were sometimes exhausted before reaching theatres where there was no water to wash themselves. Their lodgings were frequently filthy and noisy and the food available indigestible. Since townspeople shunned them, they relied upon each other and often spent their spare time

writing home to their families. Some of them were personally solitary people who became extremely attached to animals as Gillette did to cats, whom he sought at stage doors all over the country. The theatre seemed glamorous from afar, but it was a way of life, as Mrs. Fiske once said, which required giving up almost everything else.[64]

Outside of the circle of his family and personal friends, Gillette was not a gregarious man, although he had pleasant and friendly relationships with other actors. He shared the intense feeling of identification with their profession which was characteristic of theatre people. But, in the lonely life of the road, he turned inward and was one of those who surrounded themselves with pictures and mementoes of their homes. A theatrical colleague who met Gillette at about the time that he was with Miss Claxton said that he was "a quiet and thoughtful young man," although "behind his gentle manner lurked a sense of quaint and furtive humor." During his early years on the stage, when he often felt very much alone, he had continued and strengthened his boyhood habit of working by himself. He was still gay and lighthearted with those he liked, and he was always courteous. But, away from his family and good friends, he had developed a dislike

of large gatherings before he was thirty and was sometimes melancholy.[65]

Gillette went back to his family again when death came to Francis Gillette at the end of September 1879. His father's financial problems had been mounting when he died, and Miss Claxton gave a benefit performance in Hartford for her supporting player during October. In his will, Francis Gillette had bequeathed to his youngest son the heavily mortgaged family home and his own library and manuscripts. He had also left to William the shattered watch found beside Robert's body during the Civil War. The father asked his son to "preserve" its history, and the actor carried the rebuilt watch with him in his later life. Now, he stayed at home to try to help straighten out the tangle of an estate in which mortgages exceeded substantial assets in real estate and buildings.[66]

While he was still at home, his old friend, Georgia Cayvan, suddenly appeared on the doorstep. She had left public reading and was performing in Hartford as a member of a Boston light opera company presenting W. S. Gilbert's Pinafore. A Hartford reviewer described her as "a pert minx."[67]

Gillette's protective sister, Lilly, became suspicious when Georgia invited herself to stay with

the Gillettes. Lilly accused Georgia of innumerable stratagems to re-ensnare her brother. After departing for the railroad station, the young actress even went so far as to send a telegram from the train to ask William to take her some things she had "forgotten." "George," Will's sister wrote her husband, who was away, "you don't begin to know what depths there are in that girl. I am amazed & appalled at her arts & her artistic arts (if that is proper) to get hold of Will."[68]

Lilly was disturbed because her brother was courteous and refused to snub Georgia. She would probably have been still more distressed if she had known that Georgia would co-star with Gillette in a part he had written for her in his first full-length play.[69]

After concluding his apprenticeship, Gillette was about to present The Professor. He had come to the end of his training period in a hazardous profession. He had acted in many different kinds of roles, had observed audiences in varying parts of the country, and had developed many of the technical skills necessary to successful play production. His difficult years on the stage had taught him to regard the theatre as a "business," and he had become impatient with precious

people who regarded it as an "art." Outwardly, he seemed far more confident and poised than the naive and ambitious boy who had first set out from Nook Farm. Inwardly, he remained sensitive and self-conscious, although his grasp of realities was certainly genuine and he was aware that he knew his "business."[70]

C H A P T E R I I I

THE AMERICAN DRAMATIST

When he presented The Professor to the Hartford public in January 1880, Gillette had already made a careful study of audiences. He appealed deliberately to the segment his own background enabled him to understand. The audience which he could reach was genteel and middle class and wanted "wholesome" American drama.[1]

Before The Professor went on the stage, the ambitious young man had written two other plays in addition to his youthful comic skits. The first of those written during his professional career was a one-act drama and the second a spoof in five "tableaux" which he called The Twins of Siam.[2]

During one of his out-of-work periods as an actor, he had advertised his one-act play in a dramatic journal. According to his own story of what happened, a theatre in Toronto responded, and he went to Canada to act in his own play. There were two characters--a "doctor" and a "young corpse," and Gillette played the role of "the corpse." As Gillette told the story, he found that the other actor was a drunkard who "went to pieces" if sober and did not bother to attend

rehearsals. When "the young corpse" was carried onto the stage during the performance, the "doctor" was sober and jumped all over his stomach. To get away from him, Gillette ran off the stage, and, too humiliated to remain in the house, departed from the theatre in the ragged clothing he had been wearing as "the corpse." With no money in his pockets, he went to the railroad station and was lurking in the freightyards waiting to "jump" a train when an old tramp advised him to take a boat instead to the United States. The old timer pointed out he would be more certain of return by boat, since no one could put him off in the middle of Lake Ontario. Gillette took the tramp's advice but was able to pay his fare. By the time he got to the boat, he had recovered sufficiently to open an envelope which the manager had thrust at him as he was rushing out of the theatre. It contained a week's salary as well as his dismissal notice.[3]

His second play, The Twins of Siam, had the subtitle of "Sublime Historical Farce." It was about Siamese twins who kept trying to go in opposite directions. One of them was accused of murder and the other claimed that conviction would mean murdering him. The problem was solved when the supposed victim walked in alive.[4]

The Professor was also a comedy but a more ambitious effort. Although written and rewritten repeatedly, the play had a bright and frothy air, as if the author had just spun it off in one day. The story centered about an absent-minded astronomer from the Boston University faculty whose aunt convinced him that he should take a wife. Undertaking the enterprise of finding a mate, he visited a resort in New Hampshire's White Mountains where gay seminary girls and "sporty" college boys abounded. In his eagerness to do a bang-up job, the earnest and forgetful fellow became engaged to four different girls, giving the same proposal speech to each. He settled finally upon an innocent but mischievous country maiden who had been stolen as a baby from her middle class parents.[5]

The Professor was mindless, juvenile, illogical, and absurd. It followed the pattern of French and English comedies popular with the American public. There was only the slightest attempt at a villain and one unfamiliar figure in a cool detective disguised as a vacationing artist who uncovered the origin of the heroine. But the characters were almost all the stereotypes expected in a time when playwrights believed they should offer "comprehensive" types to

appeal to the public. The style of humor relied heavily upon boisterous physical action and pantomime, and the dialogue was hardly witty.[6]

For a comedy written by an American in its time, The Professor had, however, some unusual features. It was distinctly a "well-made play" put together with craftsmanlike care despite its inherent absurdity. Except for the work of Bronson Howard, who was also a meticulous craftsman following the European "well-made play" school, there were few such carefully constructed American comedies in the early 1880's. Like Howard's work, The Professor was thoroughly American middle class in its humor, character types, and dialogue. There was nothing to offend the squeamishly respectable in the play's healthy and wholesome fun. And Gillette did not wound his kind of audience with the crude physical aggressiveness typical of contemporary American farce. He depended heavily upon physical action but only the dignity of his characters was endangered--a style of humor very understandable to his audience. The "Professor" was a learned ninny, but Gillette's caricature of him was entirely good-humored. Dialogue in the play was completely fresh, natural, and idiomatic. Rarely using the asides so familiar to the

theatre-goers of their day, the characters sounded exactly like real people.[7]

Whatever the merits of The Professor might have been, Gillette tried to sell it without success for two years. When his father died and the inventory of his estate exposed the full extent of family financial problems, a need to make money seemed urgent. The family minister had not wished a career on the stage for Gillette, but now he tried to help by persuading a few Hartford men to lend the playwright money to produce his good, clean play.[8]

With a very limited amount of capital, the twenty-six-year-old actor plunged into preparations for his first production. His years of experience and observation in the theatre had given him a thorough grasp of what was needed. Before beginning rehearsals, he arranged for theatres in advance, attended to advertising and program printing, and went to New York City to hire actors. At the end of November, 1879, he told a relative, "I have a first rate company all through and am confident they will do the piece well." In the part of the innocent but impish country girl, the cast included the young woman whom the Hartford Courant called "the fascinating Georgia Cayvan."[9]

As he prepared for production, Gillette's aunt, Isabella Beecher Hooker, tried to help him. She had influential connections both through her famous family and her own leadership in the women's rights crusade. Gillette considered a week in Philadelphia, scheduled for January 12th after a Hartford performance, as a crucial test for the play. Looking at the prospects with "a business eye," he told his aunt that making money was impossible under the terms offered by the Philadelphia theatre for performance of an unknown author's play. But he hoped that success there would throw other theatres open and that he might find a new backer in the large city. "What I must have is managers or moneyed men who know about such things to see the working of it," he told his aunt. He wanted her to follow the plan she suggested of getting her wealthy friends to the theatre and "talking up" his play "among the right people, as a good thing." But he asked her not to follow the usual custom of "papering the house" on the first night by giving tickets away. "The usual first night crowd--those to whom passes are given--are of very little use in advertising--they are the dead-heads who always expect passes and therefore never come otherwise," he said. "I hope to get a different class in on the night of the 12th."[10]

Gillette also warned his aunt repeatedly against "meddling with the press." The theatres would take care of notices, he told her, and he preferred to submit his play to the "unbiassed judgment" of the critics. He was confident that those who came would "see the piece is a hit and also that it is an unusual bit of character comedy."[11]

With all of the confidence he expressed, Gillette suffered from nervous apprehension as production of the play approached. In the midst of tension and exhausting work, he vowed to get as much rest as possible. Confiding in his Aunt Isabella, he told her of "some fears that my strength will not last me through coming business press and anxiety--." But he added that, despite his feelings, he would "put a good front on it."[12]

The Hartford performance January 9, 1880, drew an audience including many of Gillette's friends and relations. His own activities on the stage and Mark Twain's play, The Gilded Age, had helped to break down prejudice against the theatre among the city's gentlefolk. Those present in Hartford to see The Professor included the family minister. He had received a special invitation from Gillette, who told him: "I've often sat under you--it is no more than

fair that you should give me an inning. . . ." The son of another Congregationalist minister and a Nook Farm friend, Richard Burton, brought his Trinity College classmates to sing the play's college songs in the wings.[13]

Reviews in both of Hartford's newspapers were laudatory, but they found some snags in production. The Courant, two-thirds owned by Gillette's neighbors, noted that the pace of the acting was not fast enough and that the audience was kept waiting between acts. The Hartford Times reported on the play's "youthful spirit and exuberant vitality" and praised it as "neat and decent," but could not fail to find "here and there a weak spot, or a thin place."[14]

In the crucial city, Philadelphia, pre-performance publicity placed heavy emphasis upon Gillette's gentility. Whether through his aunt or other sources, newspapers were aware of his connections with Mark Twain, Charles Dudley Warner, and Joseph Hawley, who had been a general during the Civil War. One paper declared him "a nephew of Henry Ward Beecher," the renowned preacher who was Isabella's half-brother.[15]

In Philadelphia as well as Hartford, the playwright had solid support from his family. He traveled there with Edward Beecher Hooker, Isabella's son and his own

closest friend. His uncle, Edward Hooker, a commander in the U. S. Navy and a resident of Philadelphia, was in the audience. Also there were his brother, Edward Gillette, and his sister, Lilly Warner.[16]

The Philadelphia production showed a considerable improvement over Hartford's, and most reviewers were generous in their praise. The Public Ledger emphasized the "American" nature of the play, and The Inquirer called it "bright, harmless, amusing, and altogether very enjoyable." Only The Times was less than enthusiastic, reporting in its review of The Professor that "It has the makings of a good play in it, but the good play has not yet been made."[17]

The playwright's hope of finding a backer in Philadelphia did not materialize, but money came from a Nook Farm neighbor who had already helped him to continue his career. Gillette reported jubilantly to his aunt on February 1, 1880, "Mr. Clemens is going in with me." Speculation was not unusual for the creator of the master-promoter, "Colonel Sellers." "He seems to like the idea of taking the risk--," Gillette told Isabella.[18]

With Mark Twain's capital, the young man set off on a road tour in his production of The Professor. The reception he met did not keep him happy. After

performing during early March in Newark, N. J., he wrote his aunt, "am as blue and heart-achey as anything in the world--no comfort anywhere. . . . I am way down.--You know how." With varying success for his play on the road, he kept going down and coming up again. The play lost heavily until the end of March when he reached Chicago and made money. At Milwaukee, in early April, he was losing again. "Am 20 or 30 years older than when I saw you last--not in years--but everything else--," he wrote his brother from the Wisconsin city. He was not expecting The Professor to go much farther and was facing the perennial actor's problem of where to find a job for the following season.[19]

Both The Professor and the playwright were saved when he went to work for the sensational new Madison Square Theatre of New York City. Exactly how he got there is not clear, but, again, he had connections which may have helped him. His friend, Georgia Cayvan, had left the cast of The Professor during the road tour. Joining the new company at the Madison Square, Georgia soon became the leading lady in the theatre's first play, Hazel Kirke. Another connection may have been his Aunt Isabella who had suggested while he was preparing for The Professor that she give him an introduction to the backers of the new theatre.[20]

The backers were two brothers named Mallory who were editors of a religious publication called The Churchman. One was an Episcopalian clergyman whose church was opposite the theatre on Madison Square. The Mallory brothers wanted to bring wholesome American plays to genteel, respectable, church-going people. They financed a small, intimate theatre seating only seven hundred for a middle class public.[21]

The rise of the Madison Square was a sign of developments in the nation and the theatre. The theatre-going public as a whole was increasing as population, wealth, and cities grew. But, with the growth, came a widening split between different kinds of audiences and the entertainment offered to them. Members of the expanding middle class had increasing leisure and wanted entertainment. Old prejudices against all theatrical performances were breaking down. Many respectable men and women were not ready, however, to enter the huge old playhouses which offered a great mixture of different kinds of shows. They did not want to see an unlimited variety of rough-and-tumble farce mixed with sloppily performed melodrama or to listen to loud shouts from the pit. This type of theatre long continued for the city's lower classes and new music halls opened for them. Members of the middle class in

New York City went to smaller playhouses where they could see a more genteel type of entertainment like William Gillette's Professor, which could not appeal to the masses.[22]

The Madison Square Theatre had created a sensation when it opened in February 1880. As a technological marvel, the new playhouse appealed to a public fascinated by such inventions as the typewriter, the telephone, and the electric light. The theatre had the first elevator stage in the world and lighting supervised by Thomas Edison himself. Spectators could enjoy purer air than any indoor theatre ever had before, since the building had a unique ventilating system. They could sit in comfortable folding and heated seats and gaze between acts at an embroidered curtain designed by Louis Tiffany, the famous artist who worked mostly in stained glass. When the curtain rose, audiences could see every movement of the players and hear every word they spoke. A much subtler drama was possible on a stage planned to bring audiences closer to the actors than they had ever been in the big, dim, old theatres.[23]

Gillette seems to have been hired by the Madison Square as both a playwright and a man capable of doing many kinds of theatrical jobs. In October 1880, he was working as an advance agent for one of the touring

companies the successful theatre was sending out. Writing to his sister, he described a dizzying life of rushing ahead of the actors to make advance arrangements and then going back to the place where they were playing to "take care of the front of the house." Within twenty-four hours, he was in four different cities on the East coast, but he sounded interested and happy.[24]

In January 1881, Gillette went to the New York theatre to become the acting stage manager there. He replaced Steele MacKaye, author of the theatre's first play, Hazel Kirke, and the architect-inventor who had created the Madison Square. MacKaye had quarreled with the financial backers and was leaving his theatre, although his play was still running there. The backers apparently needed a man with Gillette's mechanical abilities to take over a building filled with mechanical marvels. Gillette replaced other actors when needed as well as managing Hazel, which came to an end in May 1881 after setting a record for performances of a single play in New York City.[25]

When Gillette arrived in New York, the city was moving uptown. Far downtown, Brooklyn Bridge was still under construction and the Five Points area on the lower East Side had become an ugly immigrant slum. The Vanderbilts had built their imitations of French chateaux

in the Fifties during the 1870's. The legitimate theatre district had not moved up so far but was becoming centralized at Madison Square after leaving playhouses for the lower classes farther downtown.[26]

During the 1880-81 theatrical season, popular plays on the legitimate stage, except for Hazel Kirke by the American dramatist, Steele MacKaye, were still largely French and English. Before the International Copyright Act of 1891, managers were still able to put them on without paying royalties to foreign playwrights. In the season of Gillette's arrival at the Madison Square, there were English comedies including The Rivals and Cinderella at School and the perennial Camille of France. This was in the repertory of Sarah Bernhardt, who was appearing in New York in a series of plays, including one by the apostle of the "well-made play," her particular dramatist, Victorien Sardou. A public outcry prevented James O'Neill, trying to get away from The Count of Monte Cristo, from appearing as Jesus Christ in a Passion Play.[27]

At the Madison Square, Hazel Kirke, which was full of asides and mannered speeches and set in the English countryside, seemed to some an example of new realism. The realism was, apparently, largely in the physical setting MacKaye had contrived which made the audience

feel it was seeing real people move around on a three-dimensional stage. With the kind of physical framework he had created in his theatre, spectators could see the expressions on the actors' faces.[28]

After Hazel Kirke had ended in May, the financial backers of the Madison Square, following their policy of producing "wholesome" plays by American dramatists, produced William Gillette's The Professor. This was certainly more American and "realistic" than MacKaye but did not equal the record run of 486 performances of Hazel Kirke in New York City. With Georgia Cayvan, who had played "Hazel Kirke," back as the innocent country girl, the play, however, did a respectable business in New York, and went on the road for more than 1,000 performances.[29]

Another American playwright of the time wondered why Gillette would bother appealing to small audiences like those at the Madison Square. His name was Edward Harrigan, and he had far larger audiences than Gillette in a different kind of theatre for the common people. Harrigan wrote comic vaudeville sketches based upon ethnic stereotypes to amuse the masses of immigrants coming to America in increasing numbers. His most famous creations were the Irish "Mulligans," but he also wrote about Germans, Italians, Chinamen, and blacks.

Of the men and women who peopled his own sketches, Harrigan said: "Their trials and troubles, hopes and fears, joys and sorrows are more various and more humorous than those of the Upper Ten. Whoever puts them on the stage appeals to an audience of a million, while the author of Two Nights in Rome or The Professor addresses scarcely one-tenth as many."[30]

Although he was correct in observing that the urban masses were growing in far greater numbers than Gillette's kind of public, Harrigan had his own limitations. He could not understand that a playwright with a background like Gillette's knew nothing about colored balls, Irish saloons, or big city tenement houses. Gillette was blind to them, as Nook Farmers were blind to Hartford workers as a group although courteous, kind, and generous to their Irish immigrant servants as individuals. What Gillette had was precisely the background and outlook which enabled him to write for the middle class in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. And his kind of public was growing too, even though its city playhouse was small.[31]

Far apart as they were, Gillette and Harrigan held one conviction very much in common. They shared a mutual devotion to an external form of realism. Their characters were stereotypes, but both tried to make them

sound and act like real people. Both used settings taken from what could be seen in life. Harrigan went so far as to reproduce on his stage an existing New York City bar which members of his audience frequented. Gillette placed his Professor at a resort hotel of a kind familiar to many in his more affluent public.[32]

While romance continued to appeal to both the masses and the middle class, the theatre was following another trend in public taste by combining sentiment with a superficial form of realism. This trend was evident in art and literature as well as in plays. Most members of the middle class preferred nostalgic paintings like John G. Brown's "Berry Boy" to the shock of a Thomas Eakins' dissecting room table. The sunny "Berry Boy," however, was a familiar kind of figure painted with much concrete detail. Brown's boy in a straw hat lived on a New England farm and not in a remote and exotic landscape. In literature, the great best-seller of the 1880's was Ben Hur, a romantic tale of Christianity in ancient times. But General Lew Wallace, the author, tried to be accurate in his description of the Holy Land. And the concrete descriptions and colloquial speech in the stories of such writers as Mark Twain and Bret Harte were extremely popular.[33]

The transformation of society through the exact observations and testing of the empirical method had made a deep impression upon workers in all fields. Nineteenth century men saw examples of the success of science and technology all around them in their daily lives. "Huck Finn" and "Tom Sawyer" put superstitions to empirical tests, and Winslow Homer was a tireless experimenter who tried to paint exactly what he saw.[34]

In the theatre, even romantic actors like Sir Henry Irving, the British star whose productions were popular in America, surrounded themselves with "realistic" trappings. Settings were authentic reproductions of New York City scenes in Under the Gaslight, a melodrama by Augustin Daly, manager of a small middle class theatre in Manhattan. The verisimilitude which these men achieved was, to be sure, of a very shallow kind. The theatre historian, John Gassner, described such efforts well when he wrote that the "reality" of the nineteenth century theatre was "of human beings feeling and acting in places and with objects about which there could be no mistake. . . ." The characters, Gassner said, "were specifically located and specifically occupied with material realities in a material world."[35]

Gillette himself looked upon stage realism in a slightly different way from some of its other advocates

in the theatre. He did not call for the fantastic detail of Irving's over-stuffed "authentic" settings or for Harrington's exact reproductions of scenes familiar to his audiences. Instead, Gillette advocated what he called "artistic realism." "It is as impossible to exactly reproduce nature upon the stage as upon the easel," Gillette said. "Art must have recourse to the principle of suggestiveness. The mimic clatter of hoofs produces the same idea as the visible gallop of a soldier's charger from Upper Left Entrance to Left Lower Entrance, but it does not excite the fear that the animal will plunge into the bass-drum in the orchestra. . . ."[36]

In October 1881, the playwright left his job as acting stage manager of the Madison Square Theatre to take The Professor on the road with one of the theatre's touring companies. By the time of his second road tour with The Professor, Gillette had changed the play greatly from the original version he had written. There were at least four versions of the play and repeated re-writings of parts of these. Each time he rewrote, Gillette pruned "talkiness" out of the dialogue and concentrated more upon pantomime and other visual effects. The revisions speeded up the action greatly and made his play run more smoothly and efficiently.[37]

In the process of writing and rewriting, Gillette developed a working method he never changed. He scribbled notes to himself on hotel stationery or the backs of envelopes and bills. But the rest of the procedure was very orderly. The first draft went into a series of sturdy, hard-covered school notebooks, one for each act. His handwriting in black ink was usually large and clear, and he was extremely neat in revising the draft. For changes, he left a blank page opposite each original written page of dialogue and directions. The notebooks were full of tidy x-ings out and re-directions. Sometimes, there were several handwritten versions of a play. After obtaining typescripts, Gillette revised on them, often using red ink and sometimes green.[38]

The playwright also stabilized his basic acting style while with The Professor on the road and in New York. To create his character, he made use of elements in his own physical appearance and personality. For the "Professor," he pulled his long, thin features down to convey an impression of earnest seriousness. With a tiny pince-nez fastened on the bottom of his nose and his usually neat hair ruffled, the lanky young man could look quite ridiculous. Critics commented upon his "immovable and characteristic gravity" and his "peculiarly

dry and caustic speech," which were characteristics of his personal brand of humor. Gillette was an intellectual actor who used his mind and not his emotions in careful study of his part and in acting. Reviewers noticed the meticulous craftsmanship with which he had prepared his role, and his dependence on movement and gestures rather than speech to produce his effects. A Rochester, New York, reviewer noted that "throughout his acting is pervaded by a seeming self unconsciousness."[39]

On the road, a young employee of the Madison Square management routed Gillette's new run in The Professor. His name was Charles Frohman and he was the son of a Jewish immigrant who operated a cigar store in a Broadway basement. Frohman was a chubby little fellow seven years younger than Gillette. He had been in the theatre business since he was a child and had toured the country as an advance agent for minstrels. In routing shows for the Madison Square, he was accumulating a vast and specific knowledge about theatres in every part of America.[40]

The successful Madison Square was accelerating the process already underway of centralizing and consolidating the still fragmented American theatre. At one time, fourteen road companies went traveling out of the little theatre on the square. This was an unprecedented number

of companies sent out from one location. Like oil, steel, and railroads, drama was becoming nationalized big business.[41]

While Gillette was touring the country with The Professor, spectators at the New York theatre were looking at another play on which he had collaborated with a woman writer. The other writer was Mrs. Frances Hodgson Burnett, a friend of his Hooker cousins who had visited Nook Farm. The play was Esmerelda, based upon one of her saccharine stories which had a great appeal for genteel ladies. "Esmerelda" was another of those perennial country girl heroines. This time, she was torn from the arms of her sturdy American lover by an ambitious mother, who wanted to marry her to a worldly French marquis. Gillette added a humorous touch to Mrs. Burnett's sentimental story by exaggerating the character of "Esmerelda's" father into a bumbling and comic hayseed.[42]

The new play was a hit in New York, running a full year after its opening in October 1881, an unusually long period for a play at that time. Esmerelda made stars out of Annie Russell and Viola Allen who succeeded each other as the heroine, and gave one of his most successful roles to the veteran comic, John E. Owens, as the father of the heroine.

After performances in America, the play went to London where the stars were Madge and William Kendal, a popular English husband-and-wife acting team.[43]

By 1882, Gillette had achieved considerable success as an American playwright and actor. He had been very fortunate in his connections and in the assistance he had received from others. He had been hard-working, pertinacious, and willing to take risks, and had suffered from the demands of his ambition. The major reason for his success was that, when he went to the Madison Square Theatre, he was the right man in the right place at the right time. He was genteel, respectable, wholesome and technically skillful--almost perfectly adapted to the tastes of the growing American middle class.[44]

C H A P T E R I V

ROMANCE AND REALITY

By June 1882, Gillette had an established reputation and two plays in production at the same time. He was touring in The Professor and Esmerelda was on the New York stage. He had reason to expect that he was in a position to support a wife.[1]

His five-year-old romance with Georgia Cayvan was over, and she was the star of Bartley Campbell's sensational White Slave. After appearing in The Professor again at the Madison Square, she had become increasingly successful. There were rumors that Georgia had broken his heart, but Gillette would not have been comfortable with a career-woman wife.[2]

The actor-playwright based his ideas about women upon a nineteenth century stereotype--with a few divergences. His models came, of course, from his family. His own mother was an example of the nineteenth century cult of "True Womanhood"--pious, pure, sweet, and a homebody. Gillette sent her his "whole heart" in letters and called her his "precious mother." His Aunt Isabella was determined to preserve her reputation as a mother and a lady, although she crusaded for women's rights. Younger women in the family were intelligent and vivacious but devoted themselves to

home and children. Family females, young and old, always seemed to feel protective towards Gillette and to be ready to offer him help and comfort. In his plays, heroines were innocent, sensitive, lady-like, and loyal--better than men but committed to their service. They differed somewhat from the period stereotype in the degree of their strength, intelligence, and spirited independence within the limits of "womanhood."[3]

Despite the wandering existence he had chosen and his general appeal to women, Gillette was the kind of man who wanted a wife and home. His health was not strong, his digestion was bad, and he was of an extremely nervous temperament.[4]

He seems to have found the woman to suit him through his brother-in-law, George Warner, who had met a Canadian family while visiting England. The head of the family was Miles Cowan, the British Collector of Customs in Windsor, Ontario, a city directly across the border from Detroit. Cowan had a stepdaughter named Helen Nickles who had been born in Detroit. Helen became the wife of William Gillette when she was twenty-two and he was almost twenty-nine. She was a dark-haired girl with wide-set eyes who looked very much like Georgia Cayvan, although her expression was shy and

gentle, and Miss Cayvan's was bold and direct. Gillette's aunt, Isabella Hooker, thought Helen was "perfectly adapted to his whole nature."[5]

They were married in a modest ceremony at Windsor June 1, 1882. Only George Warner of Gillette's own family attended. Gillette asked his sister-in-law, Sophie, to come from Iowa to "give me away" and meet "my girl," but she was unable to appear. George showed up the day before the wedding to find "Will in the wilds of Canada hunting up a minister of the Presbyterian faith, the Detroit minister whom they had expected . . . not being competent to perform the ceremony legally. . . ."[6]

After the marriage, the young couple traveled East alone to join Gillette's elderly mother and his sister at an Adirondacks resort. Before the end of June, he was back in New York City to make arrangements for his next season, leaving his wife with his relatives in the Adirondacks.[7]

Helen began touring with her husband during the 1882-83 theatrical season when he took The Professor out on the road again. There were many husband and wife actor teams, but Helen had no connection with the stage and acted only as a companion for Gillette.[8]

During the 1883-84 season, he was in charge of a Madison Square traveling company playing Bronson Howard's Young Mrs. Winthrop, and Helen went along again. Occasionally, she left him on the road for a visit to her own relatives or to his. In December 1883, when she was with the Cowans in Windsor, Gillette wrote his mother, "I need not tell you that without Helen I am not in a cheerful frame of mind." When he was not performing, they spent vacations either with Helen's family in Windsor or with his own in Hartford or Eastern mountain resorts.[9]

In Fall 1884, Gillette entered into one of the fierce competitive struggles characteristic of the New York theatre in the 1880's, as it was of businesses of other kinds. The Madison Square managers tried to corner as much of the market as possible and to beat down competition when they could. On a very much smaller scale, they were not unlike John D. Rockefeller, who was, at the same time, ruthlessly shattering weaker rivals in the production and distribution of oil. When Steele MacKaye had left the Madison Square, he was forced to leave to the financial backers not only the theatre he had created but his record-smashing play. The pious Mallorys had agreed in their contract to pay him $5,000, and he never got another cent, although

theatre people believed the brothers made a fortune. At the time, with their traveling companies, they were building a little empire. MacKaye immediately set to work to create another theatre and smash them.[10]

Gillette had benefited from the quarrel between the Mallorys and MacKaye, but he also did not like the brothers and broke with the Madison Square in 1884. He defied his former backers by presenting his own production of The Private Secretary, a play which they were also putting on. They had temporarily abandoned the policy of producing only American plays and had bought the British rights to the comedy which had been a great success during the previous London season. Gillette claimed that, in his version, he was using the German farce upon which the British hit had been built as the basis for his own play. There was no International Copyright Law to protect the interests of foreign playwrights in America until 1891.[11]

The two productions went on the same night of September 1884 in New York City, and critics said they were both successful. But Gillette could not compete in New York with the financially stronger Madison Square. In October, he took his own production on the road, and several Madison Square touring companies followed him. The New York managers also went to court

to swear out an injunction against Gillette and stop him from performing in what they maintained was their play. A subpoena caught up with him in Rochester, N. Y., where he accepted it with great aplomb. He told a reporter the papers were so heavy that he thought he was being presented with several honorary volumes as "a slight testimonial from the citizens of Rochester." Newspapers and dramatic journals followed the controversy closely and took sides in the dispute, which was a sensation of the season.[12]

The hubbub died down when there was a compromise, and the case never went to a court hearing. The compromise caused the New York Times to express regret that the issue had not been settled and to predict it would come up again in the case of other plays. Gillette has left no record of how he felt at the conclusion of the controversy, but it is probable that his relief was great. According to the news reports, he had kept cool and presented a poised and humorous "front" throughout. He was not, however, a man who enjoyed fighting and the strain must have been heavy upon his nervous temperament. The settlement provided that he would rejoin the Madison Square and that his version would go on the road, while the British version continued in New York City. In the end, Gillette was

the winner, since he became identified in the public mind with the role of the "Secretary," which remained a perennial favorite.[13]

During the seasons of 1884-85 and 1885-86, Gillette continued to tour in The Private Secretary, booked by Charles Frohman from the Madison Square. Whether or not he had originally used the British play, he wrote at least three versions of his own. As with The Professor, in each successive version, he cut out more of the dialogue and relied increasingly upon action and other visual effects.[14]

The play was another light-hearted and absurd story, this time centering about a ridiculous clergyman. One critic objected to holding a clergyman up to ridicule, but Gillette received praise for keeping his production "entirely free from coarseness or vulgarity." In the play, a gay young playboy tried to pass himself off as the clergyman who had been hired as a private secretary in order to deceive his wealthy uncle. Gillette played the clergyman who suddenly arrived on the scene to become the butt of the playboy's ridicule in a series of incredible situations.[15]

On the whole, Gillette's version of the comedy bore a considerable resemblance to The Professor. As one reviewer described The Private Secretary, all the

characters "rush about in a wild and reckless way that keeps the audience in a state of breathless excitement and hilarity." The figure of the manipulator-nephew who survived by his wits had some similarity to the artist-detective of Gillette's first full-length comedy. As the "Secretary" himself, Gillette again exaggerated his personal characteristics. To emphasize the boniness of his long, lank frame, he stuck out his elbows and wore tight clothing. He converted his own air of suppressed nervous energy into an appearance of tense and earnest apprehension. One spectator who saw him in the part described his "diffident" minister as "lovable." Another said Gillette made his absurd secretary "very much a human being" and that "one could not help feeling just a little sorry for the unfortunate fellow," although there was no direct appeal for sympathy.[16]

While the play was set in England and based upon a German farce, the style of humor was distinctively American. The Private Secretary, in Gillette's version, had a kind of humor that was dry, whimsical, and self-deprecating after the manner of the author himself and Yankee comics of the time. There was a quality of "utter irreverence" and also of apparent good nature typical of the American humorous style. It did not

depend upon verbal wit but upon situation and visual effects.[17]

While Gillette was touring in The Private Secretary, Helen again accompanied him back and forth across the country. They lived usually in hotels, but, when the play was booked for some time in one city, they were able to stay in furnished lodgings. Helen was delighted when they had this opportunity during the Summer of 1885 at San Francisco--one of the great theatre towns of the country, although many of its streets remained unpaved. She was pleased to be able to become her own housekeeper for a time. "We do have such good times & such good things to eat," she wrote Will's sister. "How I wish you could look in upon us and see Will's happy face over his morning coffee--." They had "a Chinaman for a chambermaid," Helen said, and enjoyed the sea food and colorful fruits and flowers. They walked together in the Chinese Quarter and watched the seals sunning themselves on the rocks near the Cliff House.[18]

When their travels took them near a place where old friends or relatives were, they visited--Will's Uncle Edward Hooker in Philadelphia, his brother's family at Des Moines, a Beecher in Boston, and Helen's own family repeatedly near Detroit. They apparently

did a considerable amount of reading, both of light novels and some more serious works. Books in their library which were published during the 1880's included religious treatises of Helen's and popular sentimental novels like those of Mrs. Burnett, Thomas Nelson Page, and Archibald C. Gunter. Will also had the regional stories of Sarah Orne Jewett, many plays and other works on drama, and studies of the Civil War.[19]

As they traveled, Gillette continued to watch audiences and write plays. He learned by trial and error and worked step-by-step, constantly discarding and rewriting. His ideas started with particular scenes around which he organized his action.[20]

One of the plays he wrote while traveling was his first melodrama, Held by the Enemy. The theme was the Civil War of his own childhood in which his hero brother had died. Like Robert Gillette, the hero was a Union officer who was a man of honor and courage. There had been other plays about the war. But all except one had been too crudely constructed to interest audiences with the slightest sophistication and none had been entirely successful. Despite the bitter experience of his brother's death, Gillette's play reflected strongly the current national mood of desire for reconciliation between North and South. The war was far enough away

to be totally sentimentalized.[21]

Gillette, as usual, built his play with painstaking effort and calculation of effects. He prepared his situations carefully to lead audiences towards climaxes and startled them with sudden and unexpected shifts of pace. Most of his characters were stereotypes again, and the play was overwhelmingly artificial and sentimental. But Gillette was insistent in his written directions that performers must act like real people on the stage. He instructed his casts never to burlesque in comic roles or to exaggerate melodramatic effects. Southern characters were to speak with a regional accent, but Gillette told players not to over-emphasize this. In scenes which depended upon action, he described every movement the actors were to make on the stage.[22]

The action of Held by the Enemy occurred in an unidentified Southern city occupied by Northern forces during the war. The story revolved around the honorable efforts of a Southern belle, "Eunice McCreery," to save her cousin and fiancé, a Confederate spy, who had broken through enemy lines. "Eunice" tried to save him although she was in love with one of two Union officers suing for her hand. As the spy was captured, escaped, and recaptured, the favored suitor, "Colonel Brant," and his rival, a military surgeon named "Fielding," both

became involved in the Southerner's fate. True love, of course, ultimately triumphed over both physical dangers and moral perils after spectacular scenes of suspense.[23]

The production had features of mechanical ingenuity and some effects never seen before. Gillette produced the sounds and sights of an explosion ripping through rock walls with boiler plates struck by sledge hammers and rocks thrown on the stage in an elliptical pattern. He developed a mechanism of his own to duplicate the noise of galloping horses' hooves. The most striking scene of all was in a church converted into a military hospital, where he used calcium lighting to give an eerie effect of reflections from colored stained glass.[24]

This was the climactic scene around which he had built his play. Pretending that her cousin-spy was dead, Eunice was having him carried out of the church-hospital on a stretcher. The military surgeon interrupted her and demanded to see the body. As he approached the stretcher, there was total silence on the stage.[25]

William Dean Howells saw this scene during the 1880's and thought "there were no thrills keener in our playgoing experience than that imparted by the hand of the suppositious corpse as it falls really dead when the

escaping prisoner is carried out, face covered, on a stretcher." To be sure, Howells added, it was "too almost a coup de théâtre."[26]

Howells apparently saw the first version of the play produced in 1886. The playwright had trouble with that corpse and ended by keeping him alive in later versions. The scene remained sufficiently effective, however, to cause a historian of the drama in the 1950's to call it "unequaled in American drama" for dramatic suspense.[27]

Gillette invested his own money in Held by the Enemy and consented to newspaper interviews in order to publicize the play. He hated interviews and was suspicious of reporters but very clever in manipulating the press and getting its representatives on his side. They treated him with a sometimes wary respect and usually found him courteous.[28]

After a February tryout in Brooklyn, Held went on to the Madison Square stage August 16, 1886. On the morning after, the reviewer for the New York World called the play "rather strong meat to set before the milk-and-water theatre-goers of Madison Square" but thought Held marvelously effective himself. The Times said that "under any circumstances, and by any audience,

Mr. Gillette's work would have been followed with respectful attention from first to last."[29]

Among other hits of the same theatrical season was Jim the Penman, an English melodrama about a letter-forger who must pay the penalty of sin. There was also Prince Karl, a romantic comedy based upon a novel about European royalty by the popular American writer Archibald C. Gunter. The star of Prince Karl was Richard Mansfield, who was, like Gillette, an advocate of realism but sometimes carried his emotional portrayals to such a point that he seemed more in "the grand manner."[30]

Gillette had gauged his middle class audiences with considerable accuracy. He had given them a theme which interested them at the time. He had mixed romantic sentiment with concrete detail for admirers of Currier & Ives prints and of Mrs. Burnett's Little Lord Fauntleroy, which was top best-seller in 1886. The play was a carefully finished form of melodrama with appeal to the carriage trade. The ingenuity of its striking effects did not escape spectators impressed with technical skill.[31]

Held had some problems, however, and Gillette made a number of changes after the New York opening. He had not included a villain originally, and audiences

still wanted one. He tried to change the surgeon to fill the bill, but "Fielding" remained a gentleman who resisted transformation. He also found it necessary to save the cousin-spy in order to give his play the happy ending audiences desired.[32]

He never really solved his major problem of moral ambiguity. The "Colonel" was under pressure from "Eunice" to save her cousin and let a spy get away. He had a choice between two goods--loyalty to country and loyalty to an individual. In different versions of the play, Gillette shifted back and forth. The "Colonel" chose honor at some times and love at others. He finally tried to make a kind of compromise. The "Colonel" helped "Eunice" to save her cousin but saved his honor by resigning from the Army. Some reviewers found the ultimate solution hard to take.[33]

During Summer 1887, Gillette took his play on a road tour which his friend, Charles Frohman, booked. By this time, Frohman had established his own independent office. He controlled bookings for a number of Eastern theatres himself and combined these with theatres in the West controlled by Al Hayman of San Francisco. The success of Held by the Enemy set off an explosion of popular Civil War plays and inspired Frohman to produce one of his own. He called Held his "magic touchstone."

The new play was Bronson Howard's Shenandoah, one of the all-time record plays in the history of the American stage.[34]

Returning from the Western tour in August 1887, Helen wrote regretfully to her sister-in-law, Sophie, that they would be unable to stop in Des Moines on their way East. She explained that "Will" needed to reserve his strength for an almost immediate re-opening of Held in New York City. He had fallen off a bicycle while going "at very rapid rate," and had sprained his wrist and thumb, Helen said. Gillette was fond of speeding and also of balancing himself backwards across the handlebars of a high-wheeled bicycle.[35]

In Salt Lake City, he gave an interview to a reporter who found that the playwright was "rather quiet and reserved in his manner and does not say much idly. . . ." Gillette's manager, Al Hayman, told the reporter that the playwright had made profits of $73,000 on Held.[36]

In New York City, the play opened for a four-week revival at the end of August 1887. Gillette appeared himself as the comic figure of the drama, a newspaper artist-correspondent named "Thomas Beane." Young "Beane" was another of his manipulative but engaging characters which Gillette had not played himself before.

"Beane" tried to get Union officers to conduct their battles at locations which he had previously sketched and sent in advance to his newspaper. Another member of the new cast was a handsome young man named Henry Miller with the regular features of a matinee idol, who played the role of the hero, "Colonel Brant."[37]

By the time of the second New York production, there had been performances of Held in England and Australia and arrangements were underway for a German version with action adapted to the Franco-Prussian War. In London, Edward, Prince of Wales, had seen the play and given his opinion that it would "cause a demand for American work in England." Even the dramatic critic, George Bernard Shaw, had found some merit in the ingenuity of the American playwright. In New York, during 1887, Held received the back-handed compliment of a burlesque by the popular Dockstadter's Minstrels as "Held by the Hennery" for a mass audience.[38]

The young playwright, however, never felt he could stop, and, in Fall 1887, he was working on a new project. He adopted Frohman's suggestion for dramatization of the best-selling novel, She, by the English writer, H. Rider Haggard. His wife wrote at the end of November, "Will is rehearsing night & day and hardly takes time to eat--& I cannot understand how he stands the strain with

his nervous temperament." She added that the new play was to be "a music spectacle--with fine scenery &c--and we are very anxious for its success . . ."[39]

This time, there was disappointment. Gillette had some ingenious mechanical effects in She, but a massive spectacle was not in his line. Neither was Haggard's lurid tale of the fantastically beautiful white woman who had been young for hundreds of years in the midst of darkest Africa. Gillette, who could not stand too much intensity, tried to lighten the atmosphere by introducing a new comic character, but a Yankee clock pedlar did not really belong in She's cave. He left out a scene of She disrobing to the waist and many elements of sexual suggestiveness which added to the appeal of the original novel. There was not much left for a mass audience which Gillette tried to draw to a large Manhattan theatre. He went back to the carriage trade.[40]

For seven weeks, he toured as an actor in a double feature of plays by Mrs. Burnett and an English playwright. They were short plays which had been successful at a new theatre organized by Steele MacKaye in New York City.[41]

In August 1888, he returned to New York to stage his own new comedy, A Legal Wreck, in which he did not

appear himself. For the most part, the Wreck was a conventional mixture of melodrama and comedy but it had some of the characteristic features of his youthful effervescence and his disarming air in comedy. The principal character was the kind of regional stereotype audiences liked--"Cap'n Smith," a lovable old Down East salt. Most of the others were also stereotypes, but there was one character who did not fit formulas. This was the figure of "Attorney Merriam" who was neither a villain nor a hero but a manipulator and a kind of anti-hero. By his wits and ingenious though shady machinations, the clever "Merriam" almost succeeded in winning the heroine away from the muscular but rather stupid lover to whom "Merriam" was obviously superior. Intellectuals in the audience liked the puzzling figure, and the play was apparently moderately successful. Gillette tried to increase its profitability through a paperback novel on the same theme which Mrs. Stowe called "A Total Wreck."[42]

The competitive and restless theatre of the Eighties demanded constant effort and superficially new ideas. Gillette was unceasingly active and ambitious. In what she once called "this very uncertain business," with a constantly busy husband and no home she could call her own, Helen Gillette could not have had an easy life.[43]

C H A P T E R V

YEARS OF TRIAL

When Helen Gillette fell ill in late August 1888, she was staying with her husband in Greenwich on the southern Connecticut shore. They were in-between Hartford, where his mother and sister were, and New York City, where Gillette was supervising the production of A Legal Wreck.[1]

On August 31st, Gillette told his mother in a hurriedly penciled note that Helen's illness had developed in "a new direction which gives reason for great anxiety." He had wired to his cousin, Dr. Edward Beecher Hooker, to come to Greenwich to treat his wife, and his sister, Lilly, was already on her way.[2]

The next day, Helen Gillette was dead. According to the death certificate Dr. Hooker signed, she had died of peritonitis one month after her twenty-eighth birthday. Before she died, William Gillette had told her that he would never marry again.[3]

The Hartford newspaper Gillette's neighbors owned said that Helen had been a "lovely, graceful and winning woman" who had entered "fully into her husband's life." "To lose out of life, in the bright and hopeful beginning of it for her, one so much loved and so fitted to adorn it, is a bitter experience," the obituary added.

The funeral was at the Gillette home in Hartford and Helen was buried in the family plot.[4]

To Gillette, it seemed that "something is 'busted' within." The stable center of his life had been shattered and his equilibrium was lost. Although he often seemed reserved to outsiders, he had always been childishly affectionate with those he loved. In the midst of all the bustle of his external life, he had lived in a sheltered private emotional world. Helen had provided the tranquility and security he needed in the middle of constant activity. When she was gone, he felt that there was nothing left at the center of his universe.[5]

Gillette did not talk about his wife and never gave her loss as a reason for the problems in his life which followed her death. Instead, he fell silent and became unapproachable even to his family. It was not long before he was physically ill. Doctors could not understand the cause of his weakness, digestive disturbances, and loss of weight. But his Aunt Isabella had her own diagnosis. She declared that his illness was the result of "former ways of living & overwork, now chronic from grief I think & not being willing to share his trouble, or to hear of consolation from religious hope of a better future."[6]

The intense activity of the years of his marriage, the jumping from one city, theatre, hotel to another, came to a halt. Gillette continued to write for the stage, but, except for a few brief appearances in Held by the Enemy, he did not act again for almost five years after Helen's death. He became a valetudinarian, concentrating upon exercise, health foods and his diet, but it was a long time before his condition improved. More than a year after his wife's death, his aunt reported that he still looked like "a shadow."[7]

While trying to recover his health, Gillette stayed much of the time at home, where his devoted sister, Lilly, watched over him. After their father's death, she had sold her more grandiose house next door and moved her family back to the Gillette homestead which William owned. He paid off the mortgage and converted the attic study-playroom of his childhood into a comfortable workshop with built-in furniture and a sturdy handmade wooden desk.[8]

Gillette turned sometimes for companionship to his sister's teenage daughter, Margaret Warner, and his childhood friend, Edward Hooker. He went horseback riding with Margaret and occasionally accompanied "Ed" Hooker on his doctor's rounds. Although he was getting thinner and seemed quite ill, his ability to "put up a

good front" and his sense of humor survived. When he was on a strict diet during Thanksgiving Day 1889, he visited the Hookers and told "Ed's" wife: "Good thing happened out at the house today--turkey was tough--& I did not have to eat any of it--."[9]

By Summer 1890, he had begun to leave Nook Farm at times on a series of pilgrimages in search of health. Like others who could afford the open-air cult in his time, he fled the corrupting atmosphere of cities and sought restoration in the purity of Nature. This was the period in which the wealthy were building "cottages" beside the ocean in Newport and Maine and in the Adirondacks and other mountains. Outdoor life was the symbol of health and strength. In search of good health, Gillette wandered to Vermont and a Massachusetts seaside resort, a watering place in the French Jura Mountains, and to the Gulf Coast of Florida.[10]

It was in the Carolina mountains that he found the restorative powers of Nature at their height. He gained ten pounds in Fall 1890 when he first went to Tryon on the edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. The little village was not far from the popular health resort of Asheville, where wealthy sufferers from tuberculosis and nervous prostration recovered in the dry, mild mountain climate. Gillette

said that he got off the train at Tryon because he did not want to go to a fashionable resort. According to a local story, his train was delayed at the village, and he decided to remain there after walking over the hills. He returned to buy mountain land in Spring 1891.[11]

When Gillette began buying property in Tryon, there were only twenty-four houses in the village, and he was content that they were far below his mountain. His relations with his distant neighbors were always congenial, but he was glad they were far away. At first, he camped out and cooked his own meals over a fire, and then began building a rustic home which he called "The Thousand Pines." From his mountain, he had a view over two great peaks jutting against the sky and a tree-filled valley below. Early in April 1891, he wrote to a friend who sent him health foods about the "thorough downright ecstasy" of eating "gluten mush" in the open air. Jokingly, he told the health food store owner, who was supplying him with advice as well as mush, "I shall have to place you in my very inmost heart, where I keep only my real and absolute friends." He seemed to be improving.[12]

He was back down again early in May while making plans to visit Helen's relatives in Windsor. "It really doesn't make any dif. [sic] what I do, how live, behave,

and have my being," he wrote his friend. In a state of severe depression, during the visit, he wrote from Windsor that he would enter a sanatorium in Dansville, N. Y. He did not mention his wife but said that he was weary of "fighting" and "the thought of laying down my arms (together with the remains of my attenuated frame) and capitulating is now a restful one . . ." He added, "I cannot really go on." Confinement in an institution did not suit him, however, and he was out of the sanatorium within two months.[13]

In his crisis of mind and body, Gillette was, as his aunt had noted, unable to turn to the "consolations" of religion. In an age of Darwinian doubts and religious questioning, he had become a skeptic about religion. It was no longer possible for him to accept his father's faith in a benevolent God and the future of man. His lack of faith separated him from those he loved like his deeply religious mother and sister, although it did not alter their affection for one another.[14]

There was no alternative for Gillette in Spiritualism which attracted many when orthodox religion failed to satisfy them. The idea of spirits was laughable to Gillette, and he had made game of their vogue in

The Private Secretary. His Aunt Isabella, a fanatic on the subject, was able to commend Helen to her dead daughter, with whom she was in constant communication, but Gillette was unable to believe the message got through.[15]

In desperation, he thought of trying "mind cure," the merging of the individual into Eternal Mind, which had become a substitute for formal religion to followers of Mary Baker Eddy and others. He wrote to a practitioner in New York City but was unwilling to commit himself permanently and suggested a try-out for a week. "You do not have to be sick this way my dear Will Gillette," the practitioner wrote back. "I would be glad to help you but I never would take a case for a week as a test. . . ."[16]

Ultimately, Gillette found it necessary to follow the notorious Robert Ingersoll who was shocking the orthodox with his preaching of agnosticism. He had the ten-volume "Works" of the "Great Agnostic" and four other books by Ingersoll in his library and became a guest in the famous skeptic's Fifth Avenue home.[17]

Like many other men who had lost their faith, Gillette developed a positive antipathy to hypocritical Christians. Thinking, perhaps, of the Mallory brothers, who robbed Steele MacKaye but forbade actors to swear

in their theatre, he referred to "Sunday school sharps who eventually get control of anything of value. . . ." He spoke bitterly also of "bible-bound scoundrels" who "feel that they can rob right and left and then have their sins washed away in the blood of the lamb." "It won't do for us fellows to be criminals who have nothing like that to fall back upon," he added.[18]

Loss of faith was the subject of Robert Elsmere, the first play Gillette wrote after the death of his wife. After some tryouts on the road, it opened in New York City April 29, 1889, with May Robson playing one of the parts. The play was based upon Mrs. Humphrey Ward's novel of the same name which had attracted great controversy and attention when published in the preceding year.[19]

In his dramatization, Gillette followed Mrs. Ward in describing the agonizing inability of "Robert Elsmere," to reconcile the findings of science with supernaturalism. He also described the sufferings of the minister when his loss of faith separated him from the wife he loved. But Gillette placed more emphasis than Mrs. Ward upon a character who had been subordinate in the novel. This was a world-weary gentleman so apathetic that it seemed to him a duty to remove his presence from people vital enough to think life has value. He probably expressed

Gillette's own feelings when he spoke of himself as "dead to all things" but willing to "let people keep their illusions--superstitions--religions--or any other narcotic that will help them through."[20]

The dramatization did not share the popularity of the novel. Many intelligent men were troubled by questions of faith but serious problems were not good box office. Middle-class Americans were not ready in the 1880's to patronize the problem plays of Henrik Ibsen and they would not accept a serious Gillette. One reviewer observed of Robert Elsmere that "Skepticism vs. religion behind the footlights is not a pleasing spectacle to the general public. . . ." It lasted only two weeks in New York City.[21]

The play was unusual for Gillette both in its serious theme and in the "talkiness" of the dialogue and the lack of action. He was apparently never able to put into it the careful organization normally characteristic of his work.[22]

The people wanted to be entertained, and Gillette did not intend to quarrel with them. He thought audiences had a right to get what they wanted for their money. His Nook Farm friend, Richard Burton, who had received his Ph.D. from the Johns Hopkins University in 1888, said that Gillette regarded dramatic writing as

"a business, not a sentiment." Burton pointed out that Gillette was a practical man prepared to discard what did not work and impatient with "Lofty ideals, high art, and all that sort of thing. . . ."[23]

Gillette returned to amusing the public with a series of light comedies adapted from French and German plays. Between 1890 and 1893, he turned out one a year. All were similar in comic formula to the tested Professor and Private Secretary. They were farces with whirlwind physical action, but no one was ever hurt or could be hurt. Dignity but not the body suffered as predictable stereotyped characters faced events they could not predict. The action usually whirled around one insouciant character who had more ability to manipulate and solve problems and more common sense than any of the other flustered people on the stage. All of Gillette's comedies were good, boisterous, "wholesome" fun, and critics noticed that he could keep clean even plays based upon risqué French originals.[24]

The most successful play of this period was All the Comforts of Home which Gillette adapted from a German farce for a long run between the Spring of 1890 and the Spring of 1891 in New York City. The story line revolved around a young man of complete aplomb and perfect poise who rented out rooms in his absent uncle's mansion to a

collection of freaks. These zany characters got themselves involved in a number of seemingly insoluble situations from which the cool young man managed to extricate them by stripping them of their dignity. A notable character was an invisible guest who repeatedly interrupted the action by demanding to know "the time" from off-stage. Henry Miller of Held by the Enemy was the imperturbable young man and the winsome heroine was Miss Maude Adams.[25]

The other plays of this period were two comedies based upon more racy French originals. Mr. Wilkinson's Widows circulated about the theme of a mixup between two widows who discovered they had been married to the same man at the same time. This ridiculous situation kept audiences of the 1891-92 season "in a state of almost uninterrupted mirth," according to one critic. Settled Out of Court had a funny phrenologist who ran about seizing heads and a judge who frightened defendants into confessing crimes they had not committed and then jailed them for perjury. It was less successful and ran only for two months in 1892.[26]

Gillette turned over all production problems at this time to Charles Frohman, who was then in his early thirties. The little man was very busy extending his control over New York City and other Eastern theatres

and building up his own stars and theatrical companies.[27]

Frohman had the same philosophy of the theatre as Gillette. He also regarded it as his job to entertain and not to instruct audiences. He shared the actor-playwright's view of the theatre as a business, although his own stars fascinated him. He treated them with respect but insisted that they must be respectable and must retain the glamour of personal aloofness from the public to which they appealed. With his training at the Madison Square, Frohman believed that middle-class audiences wanted "wholesome" plays. This was also his personal standard, and he would not have violated it if he had felt he could.[28]

Gillette could trust Frohman to protect his interests when he was ill, since the producer's success was in part based upon his reputation for keeping his word. He never had more than verbal contracts with his stars, who trusted him completely and gave many testimonials to his generosity and good faith. The more serious could not praise his "artistic" judgment, but this was not a problem in the case of Gillette.[29]

Before Gillette returned to full activity on the stage, Frohman was able to protect the writer against personal intrusion by acting as a buffer. When the producer wanted an expansion of Miss Adams' role in

All the Comforts of Home, he did not ask Gillette to come to New York. The little man traveled to Hartford himself to discuss the rewriting with the playwright. He also appeared to represent Gillette in a court case involving Held by the Enemy.[30]

With Frohman's assistance, Gillette was one of a few American playwrights able to command high prices for their work by the early 1890's. Even while ill, he was tenacious of his gains and made sure his rights were protected. He sued the Madison Square management for trading on his name in advertising The Private Secretary and bought up the American rights to the British play in 1889. He also went to law to prevent an amateur company from performing Held by the Enemy without his permission.[31]

By late 1892, Gillette's aunt reported that his "health and spirits are coming up from the grave." He was about to take another of his many plunges and try another experiment with his own money.[32]

The new gamble was on a spectacle called Ninety Days with which he tried to appeal to a mass public as he had in the production of She. It was a musical take-off on a dramatization of Jules Verne's Around the World in Eighty Days, which had long been a popular success. In the spectacle, a doughty New England

spinster sets off in search of a missionary and encounters on her way pirates, a Siamese king, Oriental ballerinas, and a rapidly melting iceberg. At one point, she is pulled out of danger in an Egyptian mosque by members of a champion American baseball team on a tour around the world. Accompanying all of these scenes were many ingenious mechanical features which did not, however, all come off on opening night. There were forty members of the cast, although Gillette prudently ordered as much doubling as possible and gave instructions on roles to be filled by "moderate salaried actors." He also ordered that there must be no "burlesquing, 'mugging' or over-acting" in his comic fantasy, and the dialogue was colloquial American. "Open this door, you son of a gun . . .", yelled an actor trying to get the spinster out of the mosque.[33]

In order to ensure success and to make as much money as possible, Gillette organized his show with meticulous care, even writing his own publicity. He had, however, miscalculated when he tried to draw mass audiences to a spectacle written around middle class characters by a playwright whose name was associated with the genteel legitimate theatre. Critics generally liked the play, and the New York Times praised its mechanical features as "capital." But Ninety Days left the big old theatre where it was presented after running from February 6 to March 18, 1893.[34]

Gillette had lost a fortune on the huge spectacle, and three days after the New York production closed, he was an actor again. He wrote his sister-in-law, Sophie, some time later, "I lost my money a while ago--and had to take the first opportunity that offered to get more from 'Private Secretary' performances." The public welcomed him as the "Secretary," and his spirits seemed to be improving despite his failure.[35]

Depression overtook him again when his beloved mother fell ill in December. "Mother is very ill," he told his sister-in-law, "and the burden on my mind is heavy. If the worst should come it does not seem as if I can speak intelligibly." Before the end of the month, Elisa Gillette died at the age of eighty-one. She had become deaf in her last years but was still mentally alert, and her sister-in-law said everyone in the neighborhood would miss her "charming way of tripping about to make . . . calls as if trembling old age were a great way off. . . ." Gillette came home for the funeral and burial in the family plot at the nearby town of Farmington where Helen was also in her grave. "Will is just as gloomy & lonely & unwilling to be comforted as ever--a strange boy--a strange boy in this respect but wholly right in every other respect," his aunt reported. "He rode alone to Farmington /sic/

dismissed his carriage there & has not been heard from since."[36]

Gillette retreated to his lonely mountain at Tryon and wrote a friend that he no longer regarded Hartford as his home. He was managing to enlarge his holdings at Tryon, where he was buying up a whole little mountain of his own. He also enlarged his original cabin. For heavy construction, he employed native mountain people but fashioned his own wooden cupboards, intricate latches, and kitchen utensils himself. He built a floor-to-ceiling fireplace of jagged gray rocks in the large main room and a broad veranda with a view of the two peaks opposite his home. Writing to Sophie, he described the "utter out-of-the-world peace" and the soft, balmy air of the beautiful blue sky above the hills. "You can have no conception of its restfulness," he told her. "It is quite like dying for a while--without a physical death. And yet at times it seems the only real and decent life there is--with the glories of the wilderness & mountains--the simplicity--the sweetness--"[37]

He brought Helen's mother and her small half-brother, Hall Cowan, to Tryon to visit, and his sister and her family were frequent guests. Sophie was far away in Iowa, where she had separated from Edward Gillette.

But by the end of 1893, the playwright was giving her forty dollars a month and had assumed the responsibility of paying for the education of his niece, Elisabeth Ives.[38]

Although he continued to have periods of extreme depression, Gillette had developed an operating philosophy by his forty-first year. He had, as he once put it, "changed his route" and was moving towards life and away from death. He had no hope of the utopian future which had inspired his father and other Nook Farmers. He did not believe in their benevolent God or in the inevitable forward progress of mankind. A journalist friend reported later that he saw life as "illusions" after his wife's death. But he still held to the old values of individual loyalty, discipline, and responsibility and to his belief in good women and brave, honest men. He could make life easier for those he loved, and he could create his own little world.[39]

C H A P T E R V I

INTERNATIONAL SUCCESS

In the mid-1890's, when Gillette returned to full participation in the theatre, the American stage had reached the height of its popularity. With population growth and increased leisure, audiences continued to rise. In entertainment for the "respectable" classes, there were no real rivals of the legitimate stage. The theatre retained its aura of bewitchment, but only a minority of the strictly religious now regarded it as totally immoral.[1]

The stage was one of the great attractions of New York City, the cultural and social center of the nation. Ladies who set the social style for the country attended the theatre in the evening after spending the afternoon parading in their carriages up Fifth Avenue. Visitors to the city found the grandest hotels and most famous restaurants in the heart of the theatre district at Madison Square.[2]

On the road, companies from New York played for audiences swelled by out-of-towners who wanted "culture." Residents of smaller communities traveled to larger towns on special excursion trains to see legitimate theatre performances in the "opera house." Young men

would wait for hours in darkened galleries, clambering over seats to get good places.[3]

Stars like Gillette had a mysterious glamour which their managers insisted they retain. Each had a unique appeal as models of qualities which seemed desirable to their spectators. The ultimate in innocent feminine charm was Miss Maude Adams, whose winning ways enchanted hundreds of thousands of spectators. The model of worldly sophistication was the dapper and debonair John Drew. Romantic dash was the specialty of E. H. Sothern who played princes in melodramas which were similar to those of the past but far more polished in production. Pointing to the special qualities of each star, ecstatic articles in growing magazines and newspapers whetted the desire of the public to see them. The articles placed particular emphasis upon the respectable family life of the idols whom spectators worshipped.[4]

Audiences had a chance to see one of their models of "decency" in theatrical life when Gillette presented Too Much Johnson in November 1894. This was another cleaned-up adaptation based upon an idea found in a more indelicate French original. Gillette created and starred in the part of "Billings," a nonchalant, devil-may-care sort of fellow and a clever manipulator like his "Beane" in Held by the Enemy and the managing young man of

All the Comforts of Home. "Billings" was a cigar-smoking lawyer pursued onto a ship and a plantation in Cuba by the husband of a woman he had been entertaining. The entertainment had, of course, been innocent, and "Billings" really loved his wife. By getting others to do his fighting for him and remaining undisturbed while they whirled about, "Billings" escaped completely unscathed after a series of uproarious adventures. He presented audiences with an example of cool and humorous efficiency in the midst of what one reviewer called "a cyclone of fun." With Gillette as the unbeatable "Billings," acting completely unconscious of his audiences, the play had a sunny, bubbling air, although it was contrived and standard farce. Gillette gave his characters directions like "Careful not to overdo this and try to be funny about it" and wrote colloquial dialogue.[5]

During the 1894-95 seasons, Too Much Johnson was successful enough on the road to return to New York in Spring 1896. Gillette wrote a friend he was "grinding down with repetition of part--nervous strain--lost weight--tired out--" He was preparing another play, getting up at 11 a.m. after evening performances and writing from noon to 4:30 p.m. With a schedule like this, in middle age, he had become rather crotchety,

polite but insistent upon running his own show. He set time limits of one-half hour upon visits and described himself as "one who can't endure the joys of merrymaking--utterly loathes receptions & dances, and wouldn't go within 100 miles of a 'party'--if he could help it."[6]

In Summer 1896, the actor ended a sentimental little romance which he had been conducting with a girl named May Beecher who was a relative of his Aunt Isabella. He had not meant to lead the girl on, but could not, apparently, resist appealing for her sympathy when he was lonely. In a series of letters to her, he mixed declarations like "believe that you are very very dear to me" with "Try to forget me . . . think of me only as your loving--loving friend." The girl was half his age but obviously very much in love with the handsome actor. He found it difficult to manage her protestations of affection and, at the same time, avoid hurting her feelings. When she became ill, her mother intervened and demanded that Gillette marry her. This he adamantly refused to do, although he said, "it makes me wish that I might be struck dead that I should be harm to her." Referring to his "promise" to his dead wife, he told the mother: "you will have to take my word--there are such things that it is made hopeless--beyond thought--." Writing to May Beecher, he

told the girl that he would not see her again and asked her to "destroy _everything_ that would in any way remind you of me--." "Don't--DON'T let me or my memory be a cloud on your life--" he said. "Make it pass away from between you and the sun as soon as you can--Goodbye--you _dear_."[7]

By Summer 1896, Gillette had made money on _Too Much Johnson_ and was engaged in spending it. He stayed in New York City at the new and elegant Plaza on fashionable Fifth Avenue at the edge of Central Park. He suffered from insomnia and liked walking in the park in the middle of the night. Police officers stopped him so many times that he finally went to City Hall and got a special permit to certify his respectability.[8]

To get away from interruptions, he bought himself a houseboat where he spent the Summer. He called the vessel "The Aunt Polly," apparently after a mountain friend in Tryon. His original boat was so old and its engines were so weak that it was sometimes blown out of Long Island Sound in a gale. The age of the awkward, slow-moving vessel gave rise to an often-repeated joke about the actor. The story went that a drawbridge keeper hailed the old tub and inquired about the date of its departure from New York. When Gillette had replied, "Fourth of July," the keeper asked "What year?"

Gillette himself claimed that the guests in a large houseparty invited aboard were so bored with "Aunt Polly's" leisurely pace that they had all stepped ashore before his boat left Manhattan Island.[9]

As a cabin boy to help run the boat and to do the housekeeping, the actor hired a young Japanese who had come to this country as a student. Before Gillette found him, Osaki had planned to be a philosopher and had studied metaphysics. He belonged to an ancient Japanese family, and, at the time that Gillette hired him, his brother was a member of the Japanese Diet.[10]

Gillette invited chosen friends and relatives sometimes to cruise with him in the "Aunt Polly." One of these was Richard Burton, who played poker with Gillette. "I called them my boys," Osaki wrote, "because they performed with laughing the jokes of happy children." Another old friend from Nook Farm, Dr. Edward Beecher Hooker, was also a guest on the boat. So was Charles Frohman, the actor's producer. Gillette was once ordered out of New York Harbor when he took the "Aunt Polly" to meet Frohman, who was returning from Europe by ship.[11]

After his first Summer aboard "Aunt Polly," the actor took Osaki along as his theatre dresser and returned to the stage in one of his own plays. This

was Secret Service, a melodrama which opened in New York City in October 1896. At a time when he had almost reached the peak of his powers and could command larger audiences than ever before, Gillette had again correctly calculated his public. Secret Service was one of the great hits of the season and became one of the most famous plays in the history of the American theatre.[12]

For his subject, Gillette had chosen again a story about the Civil War, a theme which had been popular with audiences since the success of Held by the Enemy ten years earlier. He had prepared for the play with his usual painstaking care and had been collecting material for years. For background, he used contemporary newspaper stories, diaries of Southerners present during the siege of Richmond, and a copy of an official war order from Confederate General Pierre Beauregard. The playwright's directions to the actors and on settings were, as usual, meticulous and all-enveloping.[13]

The story of Secret Service was about a Northern spy named "Captain Thorne" posing as a Southern officer in besieged Richmond. A real Confederate captain, "Arrelsford," who suspects him, leads in a captured Union spy (who happens to be "Thorne's" brother). In order to deceive the Confederate, the two engage in a

counterfeit struggle which ends with the brother stabbing himself to leave "Thorne" free to continue his mission. Both the Confederate officer and "Thorne" are in love with the same Southern belle, a womanly but spirited maiden named "Edith Varney." The heroine, "Edith," tries to save "Thorne" from arrest by the suspicious "Arrelsford" by getting him a high commission from the Confederacy. "Thorne," meanwhile, has made his way to a Confederate Army telegraph office, where he manages to get rid of the presiding officers and begin to send his vital message to the besieging Union Army. As he is transmitting, "Arrelsford" arrives with "Edith" and, in the ensuing scene, "Thorne" is wounded in the hand. "Edith" saves him by offering her commission, and "Thorne" stops sending in answer to her appeal.[14]

As Held by the Enemy grew in Gillette's mind from the scene in the church-hospital, Secret Service grew from its climactic scene in the telegraph office. In the play, "Thorne," a cigar in his mouth, stood at the machine in the darkened and silent telegraph office. A shot rang out and, with a wounded hand, the tall figure continued silently to tap out his message. In directions for this scene, Gillette described every move to be made. Use of a climactic scene in a telegraph office was

hardly new. It had been featured in Across the Continent, the very first play in which Gillette appeared professionally at New Orleans in 1873. But Gillette's manipulation of the hoary device thrilled thousands in the late nineteenth century.[15]

As in Held by the Enemy, his morals were mixed. The play upheld strongly the values of love and honor, but there was again a conflict between them, and "Thorne" made a clear choice this time of loyalty to an individual over loyalty to his country. The problem of the "villain" also arose again. This time, Gillette made an effort to create one in the figure of "Arrelsford." But "Arrelsford," after all, was a man doing his duty as he conceived it.[16]

The reception of Secret Service indicated that audiences in the period were as willing as those of the past to accept contrivances, artificiality, and illogicality in romantic melodrama. It also indicated the beginning of change in the audience's value system. The choice between obvious good and evil of old-fashioned melodrama was apparently no longer a requirement. Gillette had tried to provide this unconvincingly in Held when he converted "Surgeon Fielding" into a villain and offered a compromise for "Colonel Brant's" moral dilemma. In Secret Service, there was little attempt to

compromise. In a very primitive form, audiences were evidently able by 1896 to accept some ambiguity in morality. Although some spectators expressed puzzlement, the carefully calculated suspense Gillette offered and the drama of his scenes were sufficient to entertain most.[17]

After the first night, one reviewer said, "I sat there glued to my seat, riveted to the red velvet, watching eagerly one of the most exciting romance plays it has ever been my good fortune to see." Commenting later on the play, William Dean Howells spoke of the poor attempt at a "villain." There had to be some kind, Howells supposed, but this one had "sense," and there was nothing wrong in his behavior.[18]

In Secret Service, Gillette appeared for the first time as a romantic hero in one of his own plays. At the age of forty-three, he played the role of the gallant, cigar-smoking "Captain Thorne." The tall figure of the playwright in the part bedazzled his star-worshipping audience. When he transformed his long, bony frame and clear-cut, aristocratic features from a comic scarecrow object of fun into the figure of a thrilling man of action, he appealed to two elements in his audience.[19]

Young girls and middle-aged matrons at matinees saw in him the fulfillment of their dreams of an elegant gentleman. As a hero, Gillette bore a distinct resemblance to the escort of the "Gibson Girl." This was the girl created by the popular illustrator, Charles Dana Gibson, as a model of the fashionable and beautiful lady. The extremely slim and well-groomed Gillette was physically very much like the young man who accompanied her to teas, the theatre, and dinner parties in Gibson's illustrations. He also had a patrician manner which thrilled girls like Ethel Barrymore, who was seventeen years old in 1896. Ethel went to see Gillette in Secret Service over and over again at matinees before performing in the evening with her uncle, John Drew. She believed her heart was lost to the gentleman in his forties, who had written plays in which both her father and mother had appeared.[20]

Men and boys in the audience, on the other hand, saw in Gillette's "Captain Thorne" their idea of a dashing and virile adventurer and what they would like to be. He was a noble fellow, "straight to the point," strong, direct and forceful--what a man should be. He gave the impression of a "spinning top," a tense body ever ready to spring, a strong, silent type always prepared for action which he provided plentifully on

the stage. According to one observer, he could "hold an audience as he stood motionless, and in complete silence--tall, dignified, impassive, imperturbable." Unlike James O'Neill's "Monte Cristo," however, and E. H. Sothern's "Prisoner of Zenda," the basic appeal of Gillette's "Thorne" was in his cool competence rather than physical derring-do.[21]

Small boys who saw Gillette in Secret Service remained spellbound for the rest of their lives. "It remains in my memory as the almost perfect play," said Heywood Broun, son of a New York City lawyer. "I don't even have to close my eyes to recreate the scene in which Gillette, as the Northern spy, is trapped at a telegraph instrument by a Confederate officer." Recalling the same scene, Hamilton Fish Armstrong, a member of a distinguished New York family, said "no later scene has ever excelled in melodrama the one in which William Gillette, his right hand blown away, continued serenely to tap out the crucial message in Morse code."[22]

Secret Service had the advantage not only of the admiration of young girls and small boys but also of the business organization of the enormous Theatrical Syndicate. The Syndicate was formed in the year Gillette's play went into production when Charles

Frohman had lunch one day with some theatrical business colleagues. It was a combination of the interests of six men who controlled bookings for almost all the "first-class" theatres in the United States. The men were Frohman and his associate, Al Hayman, who booked performances for East and West Coast theatres, and four other theatrical businessmen who dominated bookings in the Middle West, South, and Pennsylvania. The combination completed in 1896 at the luncheon in a famous New York City restaurant was the end result of a process underway before Gillette made his debut on the professional stage in 1873.[23]

The Syndicate which began promoting Gillette when he appeared in Secret Service rose out of the death of the community stock company system, the history of the Madison Square touring companies, and the earlier extension of Frohman's control. It was part of the movement towards nationalization, centralization, and rationalization in the growth of the huge corporation. Other corporation heads like John D. Rockefeller could point to similar results. The Syndicate brought a measure of stability to a theatre which had been fragmented and destructively competitive. For many stars and players, it ended some of the uncertainties of theatrical life which Gillette had himself experienced.

They could count upon being paid and knowing where they would work next year if they were parts of the huge monopoly. The Syndicate could direct what plays and performers the public would see, although no organization could guarantee the success of any play or actor with the public. In this, the Theatrical Trust was also similar to other big businesses which could limit what consumers might get but could not force the public to buy one particular product.[24]

Gillette was one of the stars who benefited from the Syndicate in the production and promotion of his plays. He made no attempt to fight it as some other well-known stars tried to do. The most famous and successful actress in the world, Sarah Bernhardt, played in circus tents when she came to the United States. Gillette's respected colleague, Minnie Maddern Fiske, another exponent of natural acting, played in skating rinks and churches and announced upon her programs: "Mrs. Fiske does not play in theatres controlled by the Trust." "The Divine Sarah" went back to France, and other actors and playwrights fell away. In the end, Mrs. Fiske was the only one who held out.[25]

Gillette's producer, Charles Frohman, was the major, although not the only, supplier of plays and actors to Syndicate theatres. To attract audiences,

he relied upon a relatively few successful playwrights and stars, and one of them was his old friend, William Gillette. On theatre programs, Gillette's name appeared like those of Miss Maude Adams, Miss Ethel Barrymore, John Drew, Otis Skinner, and E. H. Sothern under the magic words: "Charles Frohman Presents."[26]

In addition to his interests in this country, Frohman was trying to build up an international business in exchanging plays and actors, and, in May 1897, he went with Gillette and Secret Service to London. Frohman and Gillette spent the evening after the opening playing cards in the actor's hotel room with another theatrical colleague. Secret Service was the fourth of Gillette's plays produced in London following Esmerelda, Held by the Enemy, and All the Comforts of Home. But Gillette had not appeared there as an actor himself before.[27]

When the reviews were in the following morning, Frohman had his first English success, and Gillette had become a star of the London stage. A few reviewers didn't like the play, pointing to the absurdity of its morals and situations. But more agreed with the critic who said: "In Secret Service, Mr. William Gillette and his American colleagues have provided the Adelphi (the London theatre where the play appeared) with a melodrama

which may be safely pronounced the best of its kind since the same author introduced us to his Held by the Enemy." The influential William Archer described Secret Service as a "masterpiece of its class." Archer, the British champion of Ibsen, declared that "the leading situations were almost psychological," and praised the absence of any real villain. Another theatre critic named George Bernard Shaw scoffed at "honor rooted in dishonor," betrayal of a country for "purely personal reasons," and making a hero out of a turncoat spy. "But," Shaw acknowledged, "Mr. Gillette plays him (the spy) with so manly an air that the audience does not stop to ask what it is applauding; and everybody seems delighted."[28]

On the whole, Gillette was able to write home, "We are quite the thing in town and are being treated too well. . . . There were hundreds of notices--all good--it would drive you insane to have to read them." Edward, Prince of Wales, appeared in the theatre, to see another play by an author whose previous Held by the Enemy he had also seen.[29]

Gillette was happy about his reception but did not care for "lionizing." He managed to conserve some strength by sending one of Frohman's men to represent him at an interview. The representative answered

questions about Gillette after explaining to the interviewer that the actor could not appear because of his "indifferent health."[30]

There was one friend in England Gillette was glad to see--the playwright, Henry Arthur Jones, whose work had appeared briefly in Frohman's New York theatres. Jones was possibly the most distinguished of a few emerging writers of "problem plays" who dealt with serious moral issues. He was a playwright infinitely advanced beyond Gillette in his portrayal of "natural" characters, but he was an admirer and friend of the American playwright. Gillette always addressed Jones as "Sir Henry," although the Englishman was never knighted, and he was a friend also of Jones' young daughter, who called Gillette "Darling Gillie."[31]

When the playwright left London in August 1897, a British cast replaced the American, which had included a delighted Ethel Barrymore. An extremely popular English actor named William Terriss, who was known to the public as "Breezy Bill," took over Gillette's role of "Thorne." The run of Secret Service came to an end in London in December 1897 when Terriss was murdered by a poverty-stricken fellow actor as he was entering the theatre to play "Thorne."[32]

In October 1897, Frohman had tried to repeat the English success with a performance of Secret Service in Paris. Although the star was Lucien Guitry, male counterpart of "the Divine Sarah" in popularity, the play was not a success in France.[33]

Back in America, Gillette took Secret Service on a cross-country tour in Fall and Winter 1898. A Chicago interviewer found him "a tall, slim gentleman . . . as simple and unpretentious as a grammar school teacher." In his rare interviews, Gillette usually seemed to charm reporters who were apparently surprised to find that he was a quiet man without airs. Although some journalists were personal friends and he had, in general, an excellent press, Gillette avoided interviews when he felt it possible. He realized the importance of the increasingly influential newspapers and magazines to his career but appears to have been afraid of the press despite his great ability to manipulate it.[34]

On the tour, the actor wrote to his sister-in-law from Chicago in October, "I am a bit run down--nothing at all serious--but have to absolutely save all my strength in order to get through respectably at night--." While he was in Chicago, he asked her not to come from Iowa to see him. When she came anyhow, he could give

her very little time, since he was in a state of exhaustion. To make it up, he sent a watch for his niece and told Sophie, "I am with you really, often, & for long times." Every month, he was sending his brother's wife and daughter a check.[35]

Gillette was back in London in April 1898 with a production of his Too Much Johnson, a hit again. "'Too Much Johnson?'" one English reviewer commented. "Impossible! You can't have too much of a good thing . . ." Another declared that it was "impossible to have too much Gillette" and paid tribute to the "realism" with which the actor spoke and his acting "completely unconscious of his audience."[36]

Before leaving London in July, Gillette wrote a friend that he was expecting a busy Summer. He said, "I have relatives--friends--brothers--aunt--nieces--of whom I am devotedly fond, who are in perpetual clamor and launch bitter reproaches unceasingly that each summer goes by and I fail to visit them as I said I would."[37]

In a new comedy that he was writing, Gillette insisted in his directions that players must try to act as they would, being the people they were, if faced with the impossible situations he created. Although his directions were extremely precise, he

believed that actors must use their own personalities in their parts and that they could not be what they were not. The alleged versatility of former stars never existed, according to Gillette. Booth, he claimed, could be "Hamlet" but could not make audiences believe in his "Othello." Gillette used different elements of his own personality in the roles of the "lovable" Private Secretary, the insouciant "Billings," and the forceful, direct "Captain Thorne." An admirer said his style of acting threw both the absurdity of farce and the exaggeration of melodrama "into relief." He was "quiet, slow, dignified" on the stage, and another actor envied him for being able to write his own parts as "the center pole of a merry-go-round. . . ."[38]

Some critics complained of his lack of "versatility," but, in the 1890's, his style was quite acceptable. Other stars also used their own personalities in creating a unique appeal. This was the age of "star-making" in which managers tried deliberately to "sell" the appeal of stars like Miss Maude Adams, who repeated herself continually. The stars were successful insofar as the personalities they had were models of what spectators would like to be themselves. Booth, who believed that actors should enter into the roles of the characters they were playing, would have been horrified by this development.[39]

In his own acting, Gillette never forgot the lesson that his father had taught him and tried to create what he called "the illusion of the first time," speaking as if he were just thinking of the words he uttered on the stage. One writer said Gillette "always gave the impression that he hadn't quite learned his part and that he was ad-libbing as he went along." This also brought some criticism upon him, but was increasingly acceptable in his period. Stars like the great Italian actress, Eleanora Duse, and the American Minnie Maddern Fiske were also trying to be "natural," playing in a subdued and quiet style as if they were not actors but real people. Mrs. Fiske resembled Gillette somewhat in her personality, since she also gave an impression of controlled tension and a dynamic interior under a repressed exterior. The popularity both achieved in the Nineties indicates that their "naturalistic" acting was what audiences were coming to prefer to the flamboyance of many past stars. Other actors like John Drew and Miss Adams, while not pioneers in naturalistic acting, also tended to be far more subdued than most of those who preceded them.[40]

In the field of playwriting, Gillette wrote nineteenth century plays which were, as he put it himself, "a series of more or less ingenious traps, independent yet interdependent, and so arranged that while yet trapping they carry forward the plot or theme without

a break." He also referred to playwriting as "a puzzle." "If all the pieces do not fit accurately the puzzle does not make just the right impression," he explained. For students of the drama reading such sentiments today, it is hard to realize that these ideas were advanced for an American playwright who had started writing in the 1870's. The notion that a play should be a series of artificial "traps" had been developed earlier in the century in Europe. But when Gillette went on the stage, most American plays were still collections of loosely linked episodes like both Across the Continent and The Gilded Age in which he had first appeared. Gillette and Bronson Howard, somewhat earlier, had been American pioneers in popularizing a more unified and tightly constructed drama appealing to audiences in a mechanical age.[41]

By the 1890's, the contrived "well-made play," built around a sentimental theme, was successful in the American dramas of Gillette, Howard, David Belasco, and others, and was still popular on the European stage. There were some signs that change was on its way. The British Henry Arthur Jones and Arthur Wing Pinero were concentrating upon moral dilemmas with some social significance and there was increasing minority support for the "problem plays" of Ibsen and Shaw. One American playwright, James A. Herne, who was a friend of Gillette, had made an unsuccessful effort in 1891 to dramatize the double

standard with his Margaret Fleming. But, for the most part, legitimate theatre audiences were primarily interested in Gillette's kind of play which gave them entertainment with a "realistic" veneer and did not require thought. In the 1890's, it was still unusual to ask legitimate theatre audiences to consider the serious problems of their lives.[42]

In 1899, Gillette was, therefore, still cresting the peak of his career. The theatre centered in New York City had reached the point towards which he had been moving in more than twenty years as an actor and dramatist. He had been one of the foremost figures to bring American melodrama into some relationship with reality in its action and dialogue. He had also been an early leader in the movement towards tighter construction of American plays. Although more sophisticated than those of the past, his plays had retained the sense of bursting life in process which had been characteristic of the crude earlier American comedies. Thinking of himself in terms of the time in which he had come to prominence as an entertainer, he could not and would not present serious themes when his experience had taught him audiences wanted escape. He was, nevertheless, at the end of the century, reaching the climax of a career in which he had made solid contributions to the modernization of the American legitimate theatre.[43]

C H A P T E R V I I

SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE RULE OF REASON

When William Gillette began dramatizing "Sherlock Holmes" in 1898, the immortal detective was already a famous and beloved character. He had started off rather slowly in Beeton's Christmas Annual of 1887. But he had gained ground swiftly when the Strand Magazine serialized his adventures during the early 1890's. By the time of Gillette's play, "Sherlock" had achieved enormous popularity in both America and England. When his creator, Dr. Arthur Conan Doyle, killed him at the end of 1893, some men wept openly and others wore mourning bands.[1]

Doyle was sick of his successful detective but willing to make as much money as possible out of him if he did not have to write about "Sherlock" again. He was receptive when Charles Frohman made an offer to consider a play Doyle had once written about "Holmes."[2]

After receiving the Doyle play in 1898, Frohman turned it over to William Gillette for revision. Gillette began his usual process of writing and re-writing, making notes on the backs of envelopes, brown wrapping paper, and scraps of notepaper. With his customary care and attention to his business, he

studied the stories while working on the play. In the end, he wrote his own drama, using suggestions which he found in Doyle's stories.[3]

When Gillette came to the conclusion that a saleable play required some love interest, he asked Doyle for permission to make a change in "Holmes'" character. He sent a telegram to the detective's creator in England, reading: "May I marry Holmes?" Dr. Doyle wired back: "You may marry or murder or do what you like with him."[4]

Gillette was still touring in his successful Secret Service while he was working on the new play. A theatre manager later told the story that a draft of Sherlock Holmes was in the playwright-actor's dressing room when fire broke out at San Francisco's Baldwin Theatre during November 1898. Awakened in the middle of the night to hear the news that his manuscript had burned, Gillette turned over on his pillow and said, "I'd much rather go on with the sleep you've interrupted and rewrite my play, than go up there poking among the coals. Good morning!" Whether or not this story of the playwright's "Holmesian" calm is true, he did lose properties and personal belongings in the fire.[5]

Before completing his script for Sherlock Holmes, Gillette presented another of the light-hearted comedies

in which he did not appear himself to a New York audience between January and May 1899. He used a French play again for the idea of Because She Loved Him So, and Frohman's production featured Arnold Daly, one of the popular matinee idols of the period. The play was silly and contrived but colloquial in the dialogue and realistic in performance, and audiences liked it very much.[6]

In Spring 1899, Gillette took his script of Holmes to Conan Doyle in England. Doyle invited the actor-dramatist to stay for a weekend at his Surrey estate. The British physician, who had never seen Gillette, was waiting for him in a horse-drawn carriage when the actor arrived on the train from London. According to his biographer, John Dickson Carr, Doyle stared "open-mouthed" when "the living image of Sherlock Holmes" got off the train in a deerstalker cap and a long, gray cape.[7]

Doyle liked the play and approved of Gillette personally as a gentleman. "Gentlemanliness" was important to Doyle, who traced "Holmes'" ancestry to the English gentry and lived like a country squire himself.[8]

In September 1899, Margaret Warner wrote her uncle that Lilly had told her about his exciting new play.

Her mother, she said, was "afraid it will fail because people cannot stand the excitement of it and maintain their reason." During late October, there were tryouts in Buffalo and other up-state New York towns.[9]

On November 6, 1899, the play based upon Doyle's character opened at the Garrick Theatre in New York City. First-night spectators who had read the stories recognized instantly that Gillette was "Holmes." They saw on the stage the commanding figure of Doyle's tall, spare, and gaunt gentleman with the hawk nose. He drew attention with his quiet, reserved manner, air of calm detachment, and cool self-control. His voice was dry, crisp, metallic, and his speech laconic and directly to the point. A world-weary surface and "half-cynical seriousness" hid continual alertness and reserves of suppressed energy.[10]

While pondering a problem, Gillette's "Holmes," like Doyle's, sat about meditating in his dressing gown. He played the violin, shot himself with cocaine when bored, and conducted chemical experiments at a laboratory table.[11]

Doyle had never given a description of his detective as a whole. With "Holmesian" persistence and craftsmans-like care, Gillette had built his characterization upon hints dropped here and there through the early stories.[12]

The playwright startled first-night spectators not only with his uncanny resemblance to their mental picture of "Holmes" but also with lighting effects never seen before. During the entire play, they never saw the customary curtain rise or fall. Scenes opened when darkness descended upon stage and audience. Light burst forth suddenly or objects on the stage came very gradually into view. As one scene opened, light began to grow from a fixed point in the blue flame of the burner on "Holmes'" laboratory table. In the middle of Act III, total darkness fell instantly when "Holmes" smashed a lamp. Every light in the house went out, and the glowing butt end of "Sherlock's" cigar was all that remained visible in the theatre. At the end of the play, lights faded away, and spectators saw only the spot-lighted faces of "Holmes" and the girl he had saved, clinging together in a cameo effect.[13]

By his use of lighting, Gillette had introduced new techniques to the Anglo-American stage. In the final scene, he had used the "fadeout," frequently to be repeated. In the lamp-shattering scene, he had invented the device of the "Fourth wall." This required audiences to believe that there was an imaginary wall between themselves and the stage and that they were somehow seeing into a sealed room.[14]

Gillette also surprised his spectators, who were accustomed to exciting scene endings, by concluding most of his scenes quietly. In one scene, which they found particularly effective, a whirlwind of action on the stage had passed. The page-boy, "Billy," who had helped "Holmes" to escape the villain's machinations, stood beside the tall, lean detective's chair. "Holmes" lifted his long hand slowly and patted the little urchin on the head. "You're a good boy, Billy," he said gently, as darkness fell gradually upon the stage.[15]

In Sherlock Holmes, Gillette reversed his usual economical practice of saving on sets and changed them for every scene. He created vivid pictures for the audience. A spotlighted villain, "Moriarty," huddled over his crime records in a dark, underground cellar. In his cosy, firelit Baker Street rooms, the tall, angular "Holmes" lounged about in a dressing gown of red and gold silk designed in the popular Art Nouveau style. At the opening of one scene, the audience saw him emerge out of darkness, draped in the dressing gown, sitting on cushions, with curved pipe in mouth, smoke swirling around him, and violin on the floor beside him.[16]

One enthusiastic first-night critic exclaimed, "He (Gillette) has founded a school of his own in the matter of scientific detail of stage business and

accessories. This Gillette stamp is unmistakeable. I should recognize it in South Africa."[17]

The playwright based some of his ridiculous plot upon three adventures in the "Sherlock Holmes" series, while taking his characterization of "Holmes" from many. For the plot, he used parts of "A Scandal in Bohemia," "The Final Problem," and "The Greek Interpreter." The play centers about the troubles of a young woman named "Alice Faulkner," held prisoner by a couple of man and wife adventurers, who want letters in her possession. They intend to use the compromising letters to blackmail a wealthy nobleman. "Holmes" arrives on the scene as a detective engaged by the nobleman to find the letters. In order to defend themselves against his skills, the couple enlists the aid of the learned and brilliant "Moriarty," who controls the underground of London criminals.[18]

In the action that follows, the two genius tacticians, "Holmes" and "Moriarty," match wits. "Moriarty" believes he has outwitted "Holmes" when he manages to maneuver him into a room of an empty house. Togged out in deerstalker cap and tweed jacket, "Holmes" is locked into the room with three thugs. Suddenly, he discards the bored and supercilious manner with which he has been regarding his assailants. Springing into

action, he smashes the only lamp in the room. The thugs can see only the glowing end of his cigar as they try to pursue him around the room. Leaving the glowing butt on the windowsill, "Holmes" escapes through the only door, barring it from the outside as his antagonists surround the cigar butt on the windowsill within.[19]

As one spectator put it bluntly, the play was, from first to last, "frank and shameless buncombe." Another, the magazine editor, Norman Hapgood, wrote that "Its whole-souled unreality, its generosity along the lines of heroism, impossibility, and villainy are princely." Sherlock "wallows in incidents which we sophisticated persons should hardly care to narrate, except ironically, in the daytime," Hapgood said. "But at night, in the theatre, helped by the lights and the actors . . . it takes you through realms that leave you clasping your chair and waiting with checked breathing for the solution of preposterous situations."[20]

Gillette had deliberately used the glamour of the stage and the willing suspension of disbelief of audiences in his time. He had gone back to outright, old-fashioned melodrama with its external conflict of good and evil, abandoning the subtleties and suggestion of psychological conflict in his own former form of modified melodrama. With his technical skills, he had made use of every

theatrical device he could invent or borrow from other playwrights. He got the quiet scene endings from his colleague, James A. Herne. He repeated himself in his silent scene, dramatization of the cigar, and the figure of a cool and competent character at the center of a whirlwind of action. The play of Sherlock Holmes was what he called "a series of more or less ingenious traps" carefully arranged to trick audiences and create illusions.[21]

Gillette made no secret of what he was doing. In a first-night curtain speech, he told spectators with "Holmesian" coolness that he had evaluated them and was offering the kind of entertainment he thought they wanted. "The dramatist, as we all know, is not a student of the drama; he is a student of the public," Gillette said. "He must learn what it likes and dislikes." Study of the public had led him to the conclusion that scanting villains, as he had in the past, was "a grave financial error." The public "likes villains--and it certainly ought to have them," the actor-playwright declared.[22]

The reception of Sherlock Holmes indicated that Gillette had calculated correctly. The Harper's Weekly cartoonist, Thomas Nast, usually occupied with attacking Tammany, sent the dramatist a cartoon of

himself as a ragged beggar, hat in hand, saying "Mr. Gillette, Only One, Please!" After receiving a ticket, Nast sent another drawing of himself, sitting happily in the front row of the theatre. The impression of "Holmes" upon youngsters in the audience was similar to that of "Captain Thorne." Boys who saw Gillette as the detective also remembered him for the rest of their lives.[23]

In the same season, audiences were flocking to see the shocking Zaza, a "well-made play" by David Belasco about a French fallen woman redeemed after an affecting scene with her lover's child. The natural acting of Minnie Maddern Fiske as another kind of bad woman in Becky Sharp contrasted with the unrestrained emotionalism of Mrs. Leslie Carter in Belasco's play. In the preceding season, one of the hits had been Way Down East, in which the heroine was driven into a raging snowstorm by her evil former lover. There were some signs of change in a repertory season with Richard Mansfield appearing in two plays by George Bernard Shaw. For the time being, however, audiences rejected James A. Herne's Sag Harbor. This was another "well-made play" full of melodramatic incidents and repetitions from Herne's former plays. But it had two serious themes in its consideration of the

relationship between a common man and his wife and an attack upon land speculation.[24]

Despite the frank melodrama of his play and the calculated use of his attraction as a star, Gillette's performance in Sherlock Holmes was "low-keyed" and quiet, as in his other plays. He hesitated and stumbled while speaking, as usual, and his voice sank to a whisper in the lamp-shattering scene. The realism of his playing in the artificial drama made its absurdities seem believable, as Hapgood noted.[25]

Whatever he might say to them, spectators of the period could not help but believe in "Holmes." The detective was a hero who represented the values and beliefs of middle class men in the late nineteenth century.[26]

Gillette based his play, in reality, upon action. But he pictured "Holmes," of course, as a man of mighty mind searching for concrete evidence and making deductions which he then informed "Watson" were "El-e-mentary." The play came at the end of a century of triumphs in science and technology. Scientists and engineers had increased the food supply, lowered the death rate, turned on the electric light, and enabled men hundreds of miles apart to talk immediately to each other. "Holmes" was the layman's image of the experimental

scientist achieving practical results through the empirical method and inductive reasoning. Why shouldn't late nineteenth century audiences believe in the "Sherlock Holmes" of both Doyle and Gillette?[27]

"Holmes" represented a figure of mental power and also a man of action in control of his environment. As a lone figure struggling actively against the forces of evil and winning, he had great appeal for legitimate theatre audiences in his time. The models of success in middle-class magazine stories demonstrate that the public admired men of forcefulness and strength of will. It was an age with a tremendous desire for a hero who could win out in a competitive struggle. William James attributed the "mutations of societies" to interactions between men of "genius" and their environment. The public admired the rugged creed of Theodore Roosevelt, hero of the Battle of San Juan Hill, and Admiral Dewey steaming into Manila Bay. "Holmes" had to have action or he took to cocaine.[28]

The public rather liked the shock of the cocaine, as it enjoyed the sinfulness of "Zaza." "Holmes" was a romantic figure as well as a scientist and there was even a touch of the supernatural about him. He was mysterious, glamorous, and eccentric, although he always explained his conclusions. He could act suddenly and

unexpectedly to keep the powers of chaos and the "dark jungle of criminal London" under control.[29]

He was, at the same time, a man with the "right" kind of values. As both Gillette and Doyle pictured him, he was a "gentleman" ready to spring to the defense of innocent women and good men. He was a man of law and order who fought attacks upon private property--made to order for a middle-class audience.[30]

In his adaptation of Sherlock Holmes, historians of the drama credit Gillette with the first full development of the detective play. His "Holmes" was by no means the first detective on the stage, but others had been of a more primitive type. Full development of the stage detective drama came fittingly at the end of the nineteenth century. This kind of drama requires belief in the power of the empirical method to solve problems; the ability of individual men to turn events; and the existence of dark forces upon which reason can shed light.[31]

As playwright, actor, and stage manager of one of the most successful plays ever written, Gillette made large amounts of money. He had begun to accumulate possessions and had started a collection of American paintings with the work of Miss Amelia Watson. Miss Watson was another Hartford resident of the same social

class as his own. She painted pretty, bright, and glowing landscapes of New England, the Carolina mountains, and the Florida coast which Gillette enjoyed very much. In one of his charming letters to ladies of his acquaintance, he referred to a social gathering of the day before at which he and Miss Watson had both been guests. "I want to tell you--between ourselves--how the new sketches delight me," he wrote. "You know there were so many people about yesterday that I could not let out my real feelings very far."[32]

Gillette also spent some of the money earned on Holmes in remodeling "Aunt Polly" in 1900. After the remodeling, the houseboat was a luxurious vessel with heavier engines furnished to his personal taste. Gillette favored heavy, four-square wooden furniture after the rustic manner of William Morris; built-in chests and seats; and decorations in the Art Nouveau style of writhing plant forms in a flat pattern. After the remodeling, the saloon, with rattan chairs, and a fireplace, looked very much like his living room at Tryon and his attic-study in Hartford. It was sturdy, practical, and comfortable. Osaki and a series of cats also occupied the vessel, and Gillette's relatives were guests. He wrote a humorous magazine article which appeared in June 1900 about the pleasures of houseboat

life. "To one who lives at a great strain during the rest of the year, a summer spent on a house-boat is just the kind of sport that best recuperates the nervous energy, and prepares well for the coming campaign," the playwright said.[33]

For the 1900-1901 season, Gillette was back on the road with his first Sherlock Holmes tour of the United States. In Philadelphia during February 1901, he met the dying James A. Herne, an actor-manager-playwright like himself. Herne was touring with his actress-wife and daughters in the temporarily unsuccessful Sag Harbor and was feeling extremely dejected. Gillette had expressed his personal support for the family during the controversy over Herne's Margaret Fleming in 1891. In Philadelphia, he took the playwright and his two daughters out for dinner. As Julie Herne described this event, "Gillette was in his middle forties, tall, distinguished, handsome, with an inscrutable, indescribably fascinating personality, and that night he exerted every bit of his devastating charm upon his guests. He made the girls feel like royal princesses, and Herne forgot his illness under the spell of their host's graciousness."[34]

In Fall 1901, Gillette went to London for a Charles Frohman production of Sherlock. Sir Henry Irving, king

of British actor-managers, had asked Gillette to take it there. The huge Lyceum Theatre which Sir Henry managed had been losing money when rented out to other productions and he hoped to recoup some of his losses on Holmes.[35]

The play opened in the gilt and red-plush Lyceum September 9, 1901, and there was a disturbing incident on the first night when a group in the gallery jeered the performance. Most of the rest of the audience came over to Gillette when he stepped out and told the hecklers, "Of course, if you keep this up, you'll win."[36]

Although he spoke with an American accent, the English, like the Americans, realized at once that Gillette was "Sherlock Holmes." "I could almost imagine that Mr. William Gillette was the source from which Dr. Conan Doyle drew his inspiration," a London critic said. He thought that Gillette himself must have the great detective's "qualities of nerve and self-possession" and spoke of the actor's own "immense hidden power." Dr. Arthur Conan Doyle reported that he was "charmed both with the play, the acting, and the pecuniary result." Some time later, the creator of "Sherlock Holmes" wrote: "It is not given to every man to see the child of his brain endowed with life through the genius of a great sympathetic artist, but that was my good fortune when

Mr. William Gillette turned his mind and his great talents to putting Holmes upon the stage." Gillette, Doyle said, had "changed a creature of thin air into an absolutely convincing human being."[37]

In February 1902, King Edward appeared at the Lyceum to see Holmes, the first play he had attended publicly after the year of mourning following his mother's death. The King had met Gillette during the run of Secret Service and called the playwright to his box to talk to him again.[38]

The English photographed, postcarded, and cartooned Gillette as "Holmes." Several artists painted him, including Pamela Coleman Smith, a designer for Irving, who did water color sketches in a kind of parody of the Art Nouveau style. Her delightful sketches of Gillette portrayed him as an exaggeratedly long figure with his angular lines outlined under a flapping and flamboyant dressing gown. The theatre-loving British public also paid the actor the compliment of patronizing a burlesque called "Sheerluck Jones."[39]

With all these evidences of success, Gillette himself loved to tell a story of going to another theatre during the Holmes run and overhearing a conversation behind him. "Have you seen Mr. Gillette, the American actor?" one partner in the conversation

asked. "I may have done so," the other replied. "If I did, he made no impression on me whatsoever."[40]

In English society, the triumph of Holmes led, nevertheless, to Gillette's becoming a "great catch" again, as he had been during the run of Secret Service. Like "Holmes" himself, he was not interested in huge parties, racing, or the "fleshly pleasures" which pleased Edwardian society. With his digestive problems, he could not relish the enormous dinners served in fashionable circles. And his taste in women was for simple, sentimental maidens and not for society beauties. He was an expert at gracefully excusing himself, but could not always get away. At one time, the Duchess of Manchester asked him to visit her country estate for the weekend. Gillette replied politely that he would be unable to come because of his need to rest in the morning after an evening performance. The only train which stopped at the Duchess' station would go before he could catch it. The determined Duchess countered that she would have an express train going in her direction make a special stop at her station later in the day.[41]

An American colleague much more interested in English social success than Gillette once described the impression the tall actor made when lured away from his quiet life. "I have seen him enter a drawing room in

London, and by his presence stop all conversation," Nat Goodwin, a famous comic actor, wrote. "Apparently oblivious to his surroundings, he would enter, stop at the door, locate his host or hostess, say a few epigrammatic things in a hard rasping nasal voice, acknowledge the presence of a few friends by a casual nod and quickly take his leave." After Gillette's departure, Goodwin added, "The conversation for the next hour would be devoted to the man who had entered and left so unceremoniously. 'What an eccentric person,' 'how unique,' 'what personality,' 'splendid presence,' would be heard from all sides."[42]

There was gossip about him, with a London newspaper reporting that he was engaged to Maude Fealey, the young girl who was playing "Alice Faulkner" with him. This was one of a series of rumors reporting Gillette engaged to one leading lady after another.[43]

In April 1902, he left London after acting as host at a dinner in the dark-panelled Beefsteak Room at the top of the Lyceum Theatre, where Sir Henry Irving often entertained. Irving was among other famous English theatre people who were guests at Gillette's dinner. He had made money on the use of the Lyceum for Sherlock Holmes, the only financial success of his last years at the theatre except for his own performances there.[44]

After leaving London, Gillette took Sherlock on a tour of northern England and Scotland. He left two English touring companies playing Holmes when he returned to the United States in June 1902. He had lost weight in England and was feeling "much worn."[45]

After spending some time on his houseboat along the New England coast during the Summer, Gillette went West with Holmes for the 1902-03 season. He was exhausted again and feeling ill with constant repetition of the same part. Gillette was almost as weary of the detective as Conan Doyle, who once said that "Sherlock" gave him the same "sickly feeling" as pâté de foie gras after he had eaten too much of the French delicacy. On April 14, 1903, the actor announced jubilantly to his niece from Indianapolis: "This is the last week but one of 'Sherlock' and then good-bye to him forever."[46]

He was wrong. Doyle had overcome his "sickly feeling" and had yielded to constant pressure to revive "Holmes." A new series called the "Return of Sherlock Holmes" was appearing in Collier's Magazine in 1903. The illustrator, Frederic Dorr Steele, was using photographs of Gillette as models for his illustrations.[47]

By June 1904, there had been 4,457 performances of Gillette's play about the detective, and he was getting

royalties on them through Frohman. Audiences had seen his Sherlock Holmes in Holland, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, Austria, Russia, Australia, and South Africa, as well as in England and the United States.[48]

C H A P T E R V I I I

STANDSTILL

With the turn of the century, William Gillette had reached and passed his peak as an American dramatist. Sherlock Holmes was the last successful play he ever wrote. Audiences were in the process of changing, while Gillette, who believed in the inevitability of change, remained in many ways a man of the nineteenth century. His successes for the rest of his life would be largely in appeals to nostalgia with his own plays or as an actor in the plays of other dramatists.[1]

The changes about to occur in his career were apparently not yet clear to Gillette when he returned to his boat to rest after his 1902-03 road tour in Holmes. By late September 1903, he had bounced back again to good health and spirits. Writing his sister, Lilly, from Newport Harbor, he told her that he had been having a "fine time" with "raging Northeasters" while cruising around Cape Cod. With the boat lying quiet after the storm, he was doing exercises with a medicine ball, reading, and catching his own dinner of ocean flounder.[2]

He was also preparing for a part in The Admirable Crichton by the Scottish dramatist, James M. Barrie.

Appearing in another man's play was a new departure for Gillette, who had been writing roles for himself since his period of apprenticeship had ended more than twenty years before. The pre-play publicity included a fulsome and sentimental article about the actor in the September issue of the Ladies Home Journal. In his letter to Lilly, Gillette referred to it as "a raft of ridiculous stuff."[3]

Crichton opened November 17, 1903, in one of Charles Frohman's New York theatres. According to a newspaper report, "Everyone who is anybody" attended the première. Gillette was successful in the part of the Butler, a superior individual who proves his worth in the natural surroundings of a desert island--only to be submerged upon return to the artificialities of "civilization."[4]

The extreme popularity of Barrie's plays during the early twentieth century indicates strong feelings of nostalgia in audiences to which Gillette himself, as an old favorite, appealed. As the results of changes surrounded them, spectators appear to have wanted sometimes--although not always--to return to what they thought of as a simpler and purer earlier life. Many middle class theatre patrons were disturbed about the loss of control over their own lives which accompanied the growth of cities and corporations. They were

disgusted with the corrupt political machines which marshalled immigrant voters and held power over government. Gillette himself, although not a political man, was contributing in 1903 to the battle against Tammany Hall. He told a reform-minded cousin at that time that he had given "enough to convert a good many Tammanyites--for they sell very cheap." In an atmosphere of concern about corruption and loss of the "good old virtues," Barrie's plays about a return to Nature and a more innocent life in the past had a great attraction for audiences.[5]

In 1904, Gillette went back to writing his own sentimental drama, but he was not enthusiastic about it. He told a friend that he was writing his last play and would not "again put pen to paper" except to write his friends. "My remaining years shall be devoted to them--which will be a blight to their remaining years," he said. There had been talk that he might play Hamlet, and he had even designed some sets which he later sold to another Frohman actor, Otis Skinner. Gillette had not had any experience in Shakespeare since his early years on the stage, and the possibility of his success seems doubtful. An English theatre manager told a story about the comment of Sir Henry Irving, who was himself a great success as "Hamlet," when told that

Gillette might present the play. "H'm! Fine actor, Gillette," the manager reported Irving as saying. "I wonder if he'll have any new lighting effects."[6]

The new play on which Gillette was working was Clarice, which Frohman described as "a quiet domestic comedy with heart and soul in every line." Clarice was, in some ways, a new departure for Gillette, since there was little comedy and none of the thrills and stirring action of Secret Service and Sherlock Holmes. As Frohman put it, "Love is the dominant key, and sentiment of the sort that never fails to register with old and young, is abundant."[7]

The play tells the love story of a "Dr. Carrington," a mature South Carolina physician and his young ward, "Clarice." The ward's aunt, who had once been in love with "Carrington" herself, decides to throw obstacles in the way of their union. This spiteful lady persuades another physician, who is, of course, in love with "Clarice," that he should convince "Carrington" that he is dying of tuberculosis. This scheme leads to a break in the romance, and "Dr. Carrington" tries to commit suicide--only to be saved by his repentant fellow physician and his beloved "Clarice" herself.[8]

Gillette's leading lady in this vapid drama was a young woman named Marie Doro, with whom he was reported

to be in love as he was supposed to be with most of his leading ladies. Both the play and the presence of the very beautiful Miss Doro indicate at least that he may have been feeling a middle-aged nostalgia for romance. Although Clarice differed in some respects from his past plays, it concentrated like the others upon individuals.[9]

Clarice opened in September 1905, at Liverpool, England, where a reviewer gushed that the tall, black-haired and blue-eyed Gillette, who was at this time fifty-two years old, was "looking as buoyant and youthful as a man in his early twenties." When the play got to London, however, reviews were mixed. The Court Journal gave it high praise, but a reviewer for another periodical described Clarice as "somnolent." The tart satirist, Max Beerbohm, had fun pointing to its incredible situations, unreal characters, and general pointlessness. Beerbohm sneered particularly at a slow "she loves me, loves me not" rose-plucking scene in which Gillette was thinking about "Clarice."[10]

Beerbohm reported that, despite Clarice's absurdities, "the majority of the audience is touched." But the play attracted so little business that Gillette traded on his "Holmes" reputation by adding a one-act curtain raiser called "The Painful Predicament of Sherlock Holmes." To play a juvenile role, he recalled to London a boy

who was acting in a Frohman company of English actors still touring the provinces with Gillette's Holmes. The boy's name was Charlie Chaplin. In mid-October, the star rang the English curtain down on Clarice and revived his own full-length Holmes with Chaplin as "Billy." Gillette wrote Frohman, "You see I want to make money on "Holmes" quick--so as to be through with it!!"[11]

Before leaving London, Gillette told his audience that he and his American company would never return to the British stage. He said that they were grateful for the hospitality the English had always shown them but that they would be less than candid if they pretended that they did not like their own country best. Personally, he said, he was "first and foremost an American."[12]

The actor hurried from London to his house at Tryon, North Carolina, where Lilly Warner was ill. He told Charles Frohman that he could "get four days with her before it is necessary to leave for Boston." The Warners had moved from Hartford to his Tryon home, and he had built an addition onto the house for them. George was acting as his agent to acquire all of the little mountain upon which his house was built. Another playwright staying at Tryon had received permission from Gillette's sister to walk on his mountain. One day, the visitor

came upon Gillette rubbing the noses of some goats. "No wonder I like to come here," Gillette said, "Everything here loves me, even the goats." When his fellow-playwright replied, "Love you! They want something to eat," the actor said, "My boy, there comes a time in a man's life when he calls that love."[13]

After his four days in Tryon, Gillette hurried to Boston to present Clarice there. He wrote to his Iowa niece, Elisabeth Ives, from Boston asking her to tell him whether she was short of money. He had been paying her an extra allowance while she took courses at the University of Chicago, but these were now ended, and she had suggested that he stop paying the extra money.[14]

Bostonians liked Clarice and a reviewer there found that Gillette was "exquisitely natural and appealing in his lovemaking." But a reviewer for the New York Times was less enthusiastic when Clarice came to New York City in October, 1906. He called the play "a jumble of ineptitude."[15]

In view of the sentimental mood of much of the public, why was Clarice generally unsuccessful? One reason was probably the fact that Gillette had forgotten the advice he had once given to an aspiring playwright that a play needs more than a simple love story to survive. Even Barrie's dramas had more of a plot and a

puckish humor which appealed to spectators. In the case of Peter Pan, in which Maude Adams starred during the 1905-06 season in New York, the degree of heart-string pulling was of an extremity which the gentlemanly Gillette could not approach in public. His kind of sentimentality was also more genteel and reminiscent of the mannered romanticism of earlier days than David Belasco's maudlin Girl of the Golden West, a great hit in the same season. There was something almost over-ripe and hysterical about the extremes of sentimentality in these plays. They had spectators who yearned for a vanished childhood and the Old West as readers of best-selling Gene Stratton-Porter's Freckles and Owen Wister's The Virginian did in literature at the same time. Gillette also yearned for innocent childhood and for what seemed a happier past, but he could not express his feelings in early twentieth century terms.[16]

Frohman had made a joint announcement with Gillette that, after the run of Clarice, the actor would head and direct a new stock company at a Frohman theatre in New York City. This never came to pass. The announcement included the statement that no problem plays of the Ibsen variety would be presented at Gillette's new theatre but only dramas of a more "universal" type "appealing to the heart and not the

senses." Gillette could not draw the public for Belasco's variety of emotionalism clothed within the covering of a "well-made play." And he could not attract a smaller segment of the theatre-going public which wanted examination of "soul-states," frank discussion of sex, and social problems represented on the stage.[17]

Some members of the middle-class audiences upon which Gillette had counted for his public had begun to wish for less gentility and a more truthful picture of life than he was able to offer them. By 1905-06, Minnie Maddern Fiske had brought Ibsen's A Doll's House and Hedda Gabler to the New York stage. A former Frohman actor who had appeared in a Gillette play was hauled into court for performing George Bernard Shaw's Mrs. Warren's Profession. And Henry Miller, another former Frohman actor who had starred in the plays of William Gillette, was appearing in a smash hit called The Great Divide. This was a drama by William Vaughn Moody, a poet and professor at the University of Chicago. Although far less outspoken than Ibsen or Shaw, it examined conflicts of values in America.[18]

These plays all represented a commitment to "realism" far beyond the external variety in which Gillette was a pioneer and the suggestions of

psychological conflict he had presented. They had counterparts in art and literary movements underway at the same time. In art, members of what was called the "Ashcan School" were working on paintings of drinkers, fat women, and even slums. In literature, a school of "protest" was growing, and Upton Sinclair's The Jungle was a best-seller of 1906.[19]

The importance of these movements was only beginning and most of the public still preferred romantic and sentimental entertainment. Many were turning to the plays of the sophisticated Clyde Fitch and a friend of Gillette's named Augustus Thomas. Their work was more dependent upon clever repartee and characters who were members of "society" than Gillette's plays, but usually retained the nineteenth century value system.[20]

Frohman promoted Fitch and Thomas and felt very close to Barrie. But the time was passing on the legitimate stage for the kind of "wholesome" entertainment which he and Gillette had both favored in the past. Many members of the public were less interested than they had been in plays about pure women and brave, honorable men caught in the midst of contrived situations.[21]

Gillette had made an effort to change his style to a more emotional type of acting and to concentrate upon internal tension in Clarice. But, although he had been

a forerunner in his time and had actually lent money used to finance the Shaw plays, he had been born in the middle of the nineteenth century and remained essentially a man of that period. He could not adapt himself to the requirements of the new type of problem drama or become a "high society" sophisticate like Clyde Fitch.[22]

By 1907, he was discouraged and wrote a friend that he felt "doomed to never-ending work," although he added that this was, "perhaps, after all, best." Magazines reported that he was a very rich man, but he was always worried about money. "I would not think of playing this year or ever again if I did not simply have to--to keep the various households going which depend upon me," he once said.[23]

In October 1908, he made another attempt to change his former formula by appearing in his own adaptation of a French play, Samson, by Henri Bernstein. This was a heavy drama in which he played the role of a tormented self-made financial titan who ruins himself to get revenge upon the supposed lover of his wife. Ladies liked the distinguished-looking actor in his unaccustomed part of passionate lover. Writing about a heroine who seemed dense, Nell Brinkley asked in The New York Journal, "Why won't she love him? I would, if he was mine." Another woman columnist declared: "Gillette is

not an actor who makes a great deal of love in his plays, but when he does make love, he does it to perfection, and every woman in the audience, from the littlest schoolgirl to the staidest grandmother, responds to it." The New York Times reviewer thought, however, that Gillette was playing a role "out of his range." The actor was unable to stand the strain of the most emotional role he had ever played and soon left the part.[24]

Charles Frohman announced in April 1909 that Gillette would retire because of poor health. He would go to Tryon and then to Europe and return for a brief farewell tour later.[25]

In June, after returning from Europe, Gillette went to Hartford to visit Dr. Edward Beecher Hooker, who had recently lost a son. An interviewer from the local newspaper tried to catch him on the trip, but Gillette avoided answering questions with polite chatter as he hastened to depart. He spent some time on "Aunt Polly" and sold property which he had acquired in Chatham, New Jersey, to raise money.[26]

In September 1910, a new play he had written was presented to a Boston audience with Miss Doro but without Gillette. The play, Electricity, made some mention of social conflicts in a light fashion but was essentially

a contrived comedy similar to those he had written in the past. The theme was a trick played upon a socially conscious girl of the middle class. In order to gain her love and sympathy, a friend of her brother's from the same social group masquerades as an electrician. He succeeds in winning her affection but agrees to go into business with the real electrician. With so slight a story as this, the play was a failure. Even Gillette's close friend, Richard Burton, who was chairman of the English department at the University of Minnesota, admitted that the playwright had not resisted a "temptation to force the situation."[27]

Other critics complained that Gillette had never even tried to write a play that was a serious criticism of life or a drama with any purpose other than amusement. "His standard of pleasure is simple: to hold the attention by appealing to a childlike thirst in all of us for a story and excitement," one said. "In these sophisticated days, audiences are looking for motives, for powerful scenes, for emotional psychology."[28]

The critics said that Gillette as an actor was not sufficiently versatile and that, except in Samson, he had always played the same role in both farce and melodrama. "His plays," said one, "since he wrote them to be acted by himself, are variations of

but a single theme, which was conditioned by the narrowness of his special equipment as an actor: they all represent a man of extraordinary calmness in a series of situations that would fling an ordinary person into flurries."[29]

These criticisms did not, however, prevent considerable success when the actor returned to the stage in 1910 for a nostalgic repertory season in four of his old plays. He drew "immense audiences" and was more successful than any other Frohman star of the season, according to Robert Grau, who wrote the New York stage record of the time. Grau noted that the season as a whole was not a good one for Mr. Frohman.[30]

The little producer was suffering not only from changes in the public taste, but also from new structural shifts in the theatre. By 1910, the great Theatrical Syndicate was breaking down. This did not mean that monopoly in the legitimate theatre was ending but a new set of monopolists, the Shubert Brothers, were taking over from Frohman and his partners. There was also some tendency towards disintegration with little experimental theatres arising for professionals who wanted to escape from the star system and try new plays. Most shattering of all was the beginning of the impact of the new medium of motion pictures which had started

with the Nickleodeon in 1905. The audience for the commercial theatre built up during the nineteenth century was starting to contract in the twentieth.[31]

In 1910, Gillette defended Frohman, the Syndicate, and the commercial theatre with a speech before the Theatre Managers Association. He pretended to mock the managers as "a degraded, commercial lot." "All the people in any other kind of business or profession or pursuit, all proprietors of stores who sell provisions and works of art, all newspapers, all book publishers, and music publishers and opera managers and poets and artists and critics are struggling like hell to give the people what they want," Gillette said. "But you mustn't do that! You are the only thing on God's earth who mustn't be commercial." He pleaded with the managers "to stop this damnable commercialism before it is too late!"[32]

The actor apparently saw no contradiction between defending the Syndicate and attacking giant corporations in the Progressive campaign of 1912. The state of the nation had aroused him to a point at which he was willing to take an active part in the campaign. The newspaper editor, Mark Sullivan, gave him lessons in the details of the party platform before Gillette went out to make speeches, prepare articles, and distribute literature

in hotel lobbies. The fact that a man who guarded his privacy with the intensity of Gillette was willing to do these things is testimony to the extent of his concern. He felt with other members of the old gentry that the country must return to old individualistic virtues.[33]

In speaking to political gatherings, Gillette emphasized the evils of boss-ruled machines, trusts which looted and betrayed the people, and the lack of law and order. The son of Francis Gillette said he was speaking "because I am an American" and called upon his audiences "to rid our country of the assassins of its honor and good name." He urged support for Theodore Roosevelt as a man who "never failed to strike out straight from the shoulder against the enemies of the people" and the only man in the country who could handle "the Washington crowd." Roosevelt was the man who could take control.[34]

After the Progressive cause had lost, Gillette expressed his feelings about the current state of society again in an address at the joint session of the American Academy and the National Institute of Arts and Letters at Chicago November 14, 1913. He had belonged to the Institute since 1899 and was to be elected in 1915 as one of fifty members of the Academy supposedly composed of the most eminent persons in their fields. Speaking on the subject of Drama, Gillette said that since "the true purpose of the Play is to hold the mirror up to

Nature--meaning, of course, human nature . . . a child in kindergarten could see why the reflections in that mirror are of the cheapest, meanest, most vulgar and revolting description." He added: "Imagine for one moment what would appear in a mirror that could truthfully reflect, upon being held up to the average Newspaper of today in the United States."[35]

Gillette went on to give a full statement of his ideas about the theatre. He said that the paying public is the only legitimate judge of the drama and ridiculed "arty" critics so absurd as to regard a play primarily as a work of literature. "No one on earth can read a play," Gillette said. . . . "you could no more read a Play than you could read a Fire or an Automobile Accident or a Baseball game. The Play--if it is Drama--does not even exist until it appeals in the form of Simulated Life."[36]

He stated also his ideas of acting as a representation of life being lived and said that this had been generally accepted. But he found still a neglect of what he gave the name of the "Illusion of the First Time." The actor, Gillette said, knows what he is going to say, but the character he is representing does not. He must "let his thoughts (apparently) occur to him as he goes along, even though they are there in his mind already; and (apparently) to search for and find the

words by which to express those thoughts, even though these words are at his tongue's very end." If his thoughts seem to flow eloquently, audiences will know that the character on the stage is dead, Gillette warned. They will also know that he is dead if his movements and gestures look as if they have been prepared in advance.[37]

Finally, Gillette defended himself and the star system against the "deep thinkers" who demand an extensive versatility from actors. "In all the history of the stage," he said, "no performer has yet been able to simulate or make use of a Personality not his own . . . Those actors of recent times who have been universally acknowledged to be great have used their own strong and compelling Personalities in the roles which they have made famous. . . ." He ridiculed those who think an actor should balance roles in the air like a juggler.[38]

When World War I broke out in 1914, Gillette was again in Europe. There was a story that he tried to enlist as a mechanical expert in the British armed forces. But, since he was then sixty-one years old, the attempt was unsuccessful. He returned to the United States and appeared at a benefit for the Belgians on the New York stage.[39]

During Fall 1914, he appeared again in a play with Marie Doro. This was Diplomacy by Victorien Sardou, the nineteenth century French master of the contrived "well-made play." Gillette admired Sardou, but George Bernard Shaw called his work "Sar-doodle-dum." Shaw and other more modern writers had stolen the market and the revival was short-lived, although Gillette looked extremely suave and handsome in black tie and tails with a long cigarette holder jutting out from his lean, gaunt face.[40]

In December 1914, the actor told a friend that he was "close to a wreck (physical--mental--moral--and every other way there is)." He said "they kept me in bed the little time I was not performing, and although I hated it, probably it saved me going to pieces."[41]

Diplomacy was the last of Gillette's plays produced personally by Charles Frohman. On his way to see James Barrie, Frohman lost his life in the sinking of the Lusitania in May 1915. Gillette was a pall bearer at the funeral ceremony in New York City.[42]

In the same year, the actor lost his beloved sister, Lilly. She died at his home in Tryon, North Carolina, at the age of seventy-seven. Her husband, George Warner, and daughter, Margaret, remained at Tryon in the second of two houses Gillette owned there.[43]

In the 1915-16 season, Gillette was trying to raise money for a new home of his own in the North and went on another revival tour with Secret Service. A journalist from the Christian Science Monitor tried to interview him in Boston, but reported that he didn't have much opportunity. The actor was "the most courteous of gentlemen," the reporter said, but insisted upon turning the conversation upon the paper and avoiding discussion of his own work. A stage manager once offered another reporter a dollar for every word he could get out of Gillette in answer to questions. The manager paid the reporter two dollars.[44]

In 1916, Gillette wrote out some of his ideas about playwriting at the request of Brander Matthews, Professor of Drama at Columbia University. He scoffed at the notion that anyone could tell another person how to write a play but described some of the methods for setting "traps" and warned that a play must have an audience to exist. The dramatist must acquire his knowledge by living with audiences, Gillette said, and audiences are constantly changing. "The dramatic trap that would work like a charm not long ago may not work at all today; the successful trap of today may be useless junk tomorrow," he wrote.[45]

In the same year, Gillette made an attempt to adapt himself to a new medium with a movie about

Sherlock Holmes. He had the same problem as many other stage actors with the broken method of film production and did not try to become a movie star again. He did, however, sell another (unidentified) script to the movies and divided $4,000 of the proceeds among three nieces and a nephew. He wrote to "Member niece-nephew contingent" that he was keeping another $1,000 for himself "and we can all go on the very Dickens of a spree." A successful movie based upon Gillette's Holmes was made later with John Barrymore as the star.[46]

In October 1917, the actor returned to the stage again in a light comedy written by a Beecher connection named Clare Kummer. This was A Successful Calamity in which Gillette starred as an old millionaire who decides to test whether the members of his family love him or his money. It was in the still popular nostalgic mood and was very successful. The producer, Arthur Hopkins, told a story about Gillette's reaction after he had run an advertisement to thank the critics for their reception of the play. "I do not play for critics," Gillette told Hopkins. "I do not thank them. I do not want you to thank them for me."[47]

In 1918, Gillette was playing in another nostalgic Barrie play, Dear Brutus. Miss Helen Hayes played the part of his "dream daughter" in the drama. As a

childless artist who dreams that he has a daughter, Gillette had "never been more humanly precious and delicately real," according to the New York Times. He sent the teen-aged Miss Hayes little notes to praise her performance and brought her out with him at every curtain call. Recently describing on national television how she felt when called to the cast of Dear Brutus, Miss Hayes said: "I had a chance to play with the great William Gillette."[48]

Gillette was still a great actor to his colleagues and the public. But he continued to prove that his play formula was outmoded with two new comedies. The Dream Maker was about an old man with a disreputable past who redeemed himself by his good action in saving the daughter of a woman he had once loved from a group of blackmailers. It played between January and April 1922 in New York City and on the road. Winnie and the Wolves played one night in Philadelphia in May 1923.[49]

With his strongly held conviction that the audience alone is the judge of plays, Gillette at last accepted the verdict. The twentieth century audience had moved away from him, and he had presented his last new play. His strong nineteenth century sense of life and growth and image of the individual in control, representing the accomplishments of Western man, had ended in nostalgia for the past.[50]

C H A P T E R I X

CASTLE ON A HILL

Before writing his last comedy, William Gillette had begun to prepare the stage upon which he would play out his life. The set was a castle on a hill where he was director of all the action. He could create his own little world in the midst of a peaceful rural atmosphere reminiscent of a vanished Nook Farm.[1]

Gillette built his castle on a bluff overlooking the Connecticut River. He saw the site at Hadlyme, Connecticut, from his houseboat while cruising on the river. It was at the top of the highest of seven hills along a wooded and rocky shore bordering a pastoral, rolling landscape. In order to acquire the whole hill, he bought some one hundred forty-four acres.[2]

For some time before deciding on the site, Gillette had been thinking about a northern country home where he could live his own kind of life. Escape into a world of illusion in work and play had long been both the pattern of his life and a major source of his appeal on the stage. He had already built a mountain home at Tryon, but his house there did not compare with his remarkable creation at Hadlyme. Feeling at odds with a twentieth century

society which seemed to him increasingly cheap and vulgar, he began planning his retreat in 1914.[3]

With all of the mechanical ingenuity and craftsmanship he applied customarily to his plays, the dramatist prepared for construction of his castle. His contractor was the Porteus-Walker Company, one of Hartford's major construction firms. The head of the firm was Robert Porteus, who had been born like Gillette himself on Nook Farm and was the son of Francis Gillette's farm manager. Some of the materials came down the river from Hartford, and Gillette designed a ramp to carry them from the river to the top of his hill. He made plans for the building himself, sending the contractor detailed drawings and measurements for every nook and cranny of the structure. Frequently, he changed orders in mid-stream, as he often rewrote parts of his plays while they were in the process of performance.[4]

The building design bore some resemblance to a castle on the Rhine, but Gillette himself never called his home a castle although the neighborhood soon did. His own name for it was "Seventh Sister," derived from the building's location in the line of seven hills bordering the Connecticut River.[5]

He had "Seventh Sister" built of native Connecticut granite after a fantastically romantic design of jagged

rocks like the castle of "Dracula" or some melodramatic continental baron. Neighboring farmers provided some of the granite by dismantling their winding stone walls. Among the materials that went into the building were Southern white oak for paneling and raffia wall matting imported from Java for both its insulating effect and appearance. External rock walls were five feet thick at the base, and inside, steel beams supported the structure. Gillette directed that all materials, except the steel, hidden under rock and wood, should be left in their natural state without paint or polish. Although expensive to purchase, they required almost no maintenance afterwards.[6]

Besides planning the castle as a whole, the actor-playwright made use of his experience and joy in invention on many tricks and fancies with a practical purpose. He designed forty-seven different wooden locks for doors throughout his twenty-four room establishment. An electrical mechanism pushed the dining room table back and forth and called servants to clear meals away. Light globes were in Louis Tiffany's stained glass style but made of bits of broken colored bottles. A system of pulleys could lower a four-thousand gallon water tank suspended at the top of the castle

tower to the floor where it might be needed in case of fire.[7]

While twenty-two masons and teams of carpenters worked to create this fanciful setting, Gillette lived on his houseboat parked at the bottom of his hill near the ferry dock at Hadlyme. For transportation on land, he used a motorcycle, roaring about the countryside at a rate which brought him into Middlesex County Court for speeding. In 1918, when he was sixty-five years old, the actor was racing at high speed down a long slope to the ferry dock. Crossing from the opposite bank, the ferrymen saw his motorcycle plunge over the dock and carry Gillette into the river. When they fished him up, the actor emerged with a bravado worthy of his "Captain Thorne." Since he was already wet, he told the men, he might as well go back into the river and attach a line to his motorcycle. The ferrymen managed to dissuade him from this, and Gillette retired dripping to his houseboat.[8]

While engaged in creating his castle, Gillette was a busy and happy man. When it was necessary for him to be away making more money to pay huge expenses, he left his trusted Osaki in charge. He sent notes to the construction supervisor from the Plaza Hotel in New York, informing him of change-orders as building

proceeded. He also sent the supervisor tickets for his wife and a friend to see Dear Brutus and paid the expenses of a carpenter who needed an emergency operation.[9]

In 1922, after completion, Gillette invited the families of workmen and residents of the neighborhood to a series of small teas. He had some very congenial neighbors including the remarkable Hamilton sisters--Edith, the classicist, and Dr. Alice, the pioneer in public health--who lived in a house near the ferry dock below the castle. He was also a friend of the Congregationalist minister in a nearby village, although he did not attend his church.[10]

Visitors approached the building by a winding road cut through the woods on the side of the hill. They followed a turn around a bend before seeing the jagged rock tower of the castle looming above a terraced garden at the end of an avenue lined with long, narrow evergreens. The scene was so blatantly artificial and so melodramatically romantic that it seemed to be painted upon a backdrop.[11]

Gillette's guests entered a small flagged lobby through a porte-cochère and walked up a staircase into a great hall two stories high and lined with rock. On one side, there was a huge rock fireplace with ledges

carrying miniature figures of exotic African musicians and cosy ceramic cats. The fireplace ledges were so arranged that servants could climb up them like steps to water the flowers in rock pots over the mantle. On the other side of the room, under a balcony, there were sturdy built-in couches covered with pillows.[12]

With all the artificial grandeur of the opening, the castle reflected in many ways the personally simple and almost ascetic habits of its contradictory creator. He liked rustic handicraft in the nineteenth century style popularized by William Morris. The dining room and lounge off the great hall were small, and bedrooms off the balcony were strictly utilitarian with white iron bedsteads and built-in wooden bureaus.[13]

The building was like the nineteenth century "well-made play" which Gillette had learned to put together. It was a carefully plotted and contrived creation exhibiting high standards of craftsmanship, technical skill, and attention to detail. The concoction bore little relationship to contemporary reality but was practical for the purposes the dramatist intended to achieve. Full of tricks and sensational effects, it was built around a single star.[14]

Gillette organized life in the castle on a schedule based upon what he once called "my strange and ungodly

hours and habits." These hours and habits were orderly and regular, although they followed the pattern of stage life and reversed the schedule most men followed. The actor did not have breakfast until 11 a.m. and lunch was in the middle of the afternoon. He liked to exercise regularly, and neighbors could see him "jogging" along country roads before "jogging" became a popular sport. At night, he worked in his small first-floor study furnished with the handmade wooden desk from Nook Farm and a chair that pushed back and forth on wooden tracks. He had a door built in the study leading down to his carpentry workshop in the basement. When midnight struck, Osaki came to discuss events of the day for exactly one-half hour every night.[15]

Osaki had his own little house on the riverfront grounds below the bluff. He acted as secretary, flower gardener, purchasing agent, and messenger. Sometimes, Gillette rode with him in a donkey cart to get mail and supplies from a nearby village. Neighbors found it amusing to see the tall, long-legged actor beside the little Japanese in the cart.[16]

After construction, Gillette, the Nature lover, kept six men on the "Seventh Sister" grounds and also picked up underbrush himself. His staff maintained

seven miles of trails, with rustic bridges and summerhouse, and a grove with a large, clear goldfish pool. The actor-director could stand on an abutment built out from his flagged terrace and feel like the lord of all he surveyed as he looked down upon the broad, winding river and the little people at the ferry dock below.[17]

The game he liked best to play, however, was running his little engines on a railroad track built around his grounds. For this, he put on a costume of striped overalls and a billed engineer's cap. The ride seemed thrilling and dangerous like the escapades of "Holmes" and "Captain Thorne." Passengers sometimes felt shaken after zipping along the steep cliffside, through tunnels, and under overhanging rocks. But Gillette had safety mechanisms installed to ensure that no one was hurt.[18]

The host showed guests at "Seventh Sister" a collection of landscapes and seascapes, mostly American and mildly impressionistic, in a tower room art gallery. He had a library of hundreds of volumes ranging from light novels and detective stories to the papers of Thomas Jefferson and addresses of Theodore Roosevelt.[19]

Some guests who came to the castle were distinguished men, including Albert Einstein and Osaki's brother, who

had been Mayor of Tokyo and Minister of Justice in a Japanese Cabinet. There were also old friends from Nook Farm like Dr. Edward Beecher Hooker and Richard Burton. When Dr. Hooker's son, Joseph, married in 1924, the actor turned the castle and its grounds over to the young couple for their honeymoon and went to stay in a hotel for a week himself. Some of his guests were children from the neighborhood who liked to take rides on his miniature railroad. A favorite from farther away was his housekeeper's granddaughter. When she was six years old, Gillette wrote to her: "I am having a terrible time celebrating your Birthday. I got up at six--went downstairs six at a time--kissed the cat six times--ate six eggs--and drank six cups of coffee."[20]

Gillette regarded it as a ccmpliment to his guests if his cats liked them. He liked cats himself for what he called their "unconquerable independence." There were some fifteen of them at the castle where the housekeeper called them to dinner with a bell. The actor, Roland Young, who played "Dr. Watson" in the movies, drew sketches of one named "Charles Dudley" lounging lazily about "Seventh Sister."[21]

Gillette continued to take an active interest in what was happening in the world outside his castle, although he despised what he described as "the

golf--jazz--and cheap rotters" of the middle class in the Twenties. He also detested abstract paintings but collected photographs of them which he found in magazines and newspapers. He had enormous files of clippings on subjects ranging from jokes to reptiles, insects, birds, travel, railroads, Abraham Lincoln, current events, and cats.[22]

Expenses were heavy for keeping up what the actor called his "Hadlyme stone heap." With an increasingly sardonic wit, he joked about the cost of living in the Twenties, suggesting in sending gifts of cash that the recipient might buy a necktie or "a peck of potatoes." But money problems never ceased to dog him, and he was not earning anything at what he called his "trade" after a 1922-23 revival. In 1925, he sold the mountain land at Tryon to a group of real estate developers, and, in 1927, he tried a new way of making money.[23]

At the age of seventy-four, Gillette produced his first detective novel. This was The Astounding Crime on Torrington Road, published by Harper & Brothers in 1927. The novel was very much like his "well-made plays," full of tricks and mechanical devices and revealing a slightly mocking attitude towards its readers. Torrington Road was a clever jape built around the central figure of a somewhat sinister but good-hearted

confidence man who helps a young inventor provide for his family. The mystery lies in a mechanism which the inventor devises to make his death look like murder when it is really suicide. Reviewers found the story "thrilling" and "ingenious," but the playwright did not attempt a novel again.[24]

Only a few months before the 1929 Crash, Gillette took the advice of Joseph Hooker, a Hartford insurance executive, and bought himself a $10,000 a year annuity. He needed more than that, however, to keep up his castle and continue his custom of traveling back and forth to Europe. His pattern was similar to the life of Nook Farmers he had observed in his youth, alternating between rural peace and the centers of "civilization," and often hard-pressed to keep up with expenses.[25]

There was one way in which Gillette might make money, and this was in another revival of Sherlock Holmes. Despite the Crash, plans continued for a new production by George Crouse Tyler, one of the major producers of the time. Before going out again in Holmes, Gillette rewrote the ending for the fifth time in the thirty-year history of the play.[26]

In advance of the opening, Tyler organized pre-play publicity and a very fancy souvenir program. He sent photographers out to "Seventh Sister" to take pictures

of the grounds and trade upon Gillette's already well-established reputation for eccentricity. Arrangements were elaborate for a ceremonial on the opening night of the play.[27]

Sherlock Holmes opened again in New York City November 25, 1929, less than a month after the stock market blew up. The reception for the old play with its seventy-six-year-old star was overwhelming. The novelist, Booth Tarkington, expressed what many seemed to feel when he told Gillette: "I would rather see you play Sherlock Holmes than be a child again on Christmas morning."[28]

Uncertainties in the present may have contributed to the wave of nostalgia which immediately enveloped the aged actor-dramatist. The power of Tyler to organize and manipulate the media also helped. So did Gillette's personal connections with men of considerable prestige at the time like President Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia University, a fellow member of the exclusive American Academy of Arts and Letters, and Professor William Lyon Phelps of Yale University, a former Hartford resident and fellow cat-lover.[29]

On the first night of the revival, President Butler made an introductory speech, urging the audience to note

the craftsmanship of a former time in Gillette's work. After the curtain fell, Professor Phelps conferred the degree of Master of Acting upon the star and gave him a volume of letters congratulating him upon his return. Among the letters was one from Calvin Coolidge and others came from many famous writers and theatrical colleagues. Some, including the poet, Edward Arlington Robinson, and the actor, Walter Hampden, recalled seeing Gillette first when they were boys. With his habitual self-deprecating humor, Gillette responded to the praise by saying it must all be "a case of mistaken identity."[30]

Audiences kept coming in the following weeks, and journalists noted that they were of a particular character. The spectators were distinctly middle-class--the same "respectable" type of audiences Gillette had always attracted. Many members of the crowd were, in fact, as the letters indicated, exactly the same people who had seen Gillette in 1899, and these people brought their children and grandchildren. They were of a type which had been turning away from the legitimate stage since the early years of the new century. They did not want plays about lightly accepted triangles or deep psychological problems like many of those before the public in the Twenties. "Artistic" drama which paid more attention to what was going on inside the author

than to the audience outside him did not interest them.[31]

One observer noted that many members of Gillette's audiences were going "to renew their youth." He said that the audiences were composed of "the finest people that had been assembled in a New York theatre in many a day." Another reviewer, commenting also on the "quality public" going to see Holmes, declared: "It is the old 'family' audience, father, mother, son and daughter; debutante theatre parties; gray-haired, comfortable old ladies; middle-aged businessmen in middle-aged dinner coats taking the son and heir to share in vanishing memory. It is the schoolteachers and artists. . . ."[32]

"Why is it that such an audience as 'Sherlock Holmes' is drawing cannot be permanently reattached to the theatre?" this reviewer asked.[33]

One answer came from the columnist for the New York World, William Bolitho, who spoke of Holmes' evocation of "that time and that place which above all thought itself final, and that nothing different was ever going to happen again."[34]

Another came from critics like Brooks Atkinson of the New York Times, who, while invariably friendly, felt compelled to point out signs of age in Gillette's Holmes.

His play, they said, was full of tricks and sentimentality and had a creaky plot and stereotyped characters.[35]

A third answer came from the thoughtful student of drama and motion pictures, Gilbert Seldes. The great popularity actors like Gillette had known in the past was no longer available to stars of the stage, Seldes said. This kind of popularity, resting upon exploitation of a star's individuality, had passed to the movies and the radio. The tribute to Gillette, according to Seldes, was "a gesture of farewell to the old theater which did not know the brutality and speed and complexity, the ambitions, and problems and solutions of the theater of today."[36]

While pointing out that Gillette belonged to the past, these commentators and others joined in praising the remarkable modernity of his acting. Among the critics of the aging play was John Mason Brown of the New York Post who called attention to Gillette's enduring acting style of quiet understatement. Brown marveled at the "freshness with which he attacks his lines each night" after hundreds of performances as "Holmes."[37]

Gillette left Hall Cowan, who was Helen's half-brother, in charge of his precious castle when he went out on the road with Holmes between 1930 and 1932.

Cowan had been a patent medicine company executive before yielding to Gillette's urgings to bring his wife, Allie, to "Seventh Sister" and occupy part of a house much too big for one man. The actor needed Cowan and his wife to take care of his estate and attend to some of his business while away, but their relationship was essentially personal and very close.[38]

While still performing Holmes on the stage, Gillette made his first radio appearance with his own dramatization of Conan Doyle's story, "The Speckled Band," October 20, 1930. His interest in money apparently over-rode dislike of a medium he once described as a "bawling and blithering advertising business." In preparing the radioscript, Gillette went through his usual process of rewriting and revision. His appearance was for the purpose of introducing a new radio series on "Holmes." The George Washington Coffee Refining Company, the sponsor, informed him that listeners had requested more than 2,000 of the "samples" advertised on the broadcast.[39]

During 1930, he received one honorary degree after another, and Hartford's "gentry" honored him at a testimonial luncheon. The series of degrees came from Columbia, Yale, Trinity and Dartmouth. Gillette probably preferred the degree of "Doctor of Quips and Quiddities" bestowed upon him by cronies in the Twilight Club, an exclusive group of Connecticut gentlemen.[40]

When his final road tour drew to a close at Wilmington, Delaware, March 19, 1932, members of his cast paid him their own tribute. They expressed their appreciation for "Your kindness and gracious consideration always to the members of your company, who, having a real affection for you, anticipate the closing of the tour tonight with genuine regret."[41]

Incredibly, Gillette was not yet finished with the detective on whom he had hoped to make as much money as possible and abandon in 1905. The Lux Radio Theatre performed a condensation which he made of his own Holmes November 18, 1935. He did not act in the part but made a post-performance appearance in which he wished the radio audience "Merry Christmas and Happy New Year and many happy returns of the Fourth of July." In the same year, Doubleday, Doran published an edition of Holmes for which he wrote a preface advising buyers of the book not to read it, since reading a play is an impossibility. There was an introduction by Vincent Starrett, the well-known journalist and "Holmes" buff, who had first seen Gillette as the detective when he was fourteen years old.[42]

The actor's last appearance on the stage was not in his own Holmes but in a light comedy by another playwright between January and April 1936 when he was

eighty-two years old. He played the leading role in the John Golden production of Three Wise Fools, a light comedy by Austin Strong. In this sentimental play, Charles Coburn and James Kirkwood, both performers of major importance themselves, were the other members of a trio of three eccentric old men. The welcome for the play was not of the magnitude of Holmes, but Gillette was successful in his part. He told audiences that he would probably still be "farewelling" at the Bicentennial of the United States in 1976.[43]

This, at last, was not at all likely. Gillette's mind remained sharp and clear. But he was becoming physically bent with age. He had been ill just before the opening of Three Wise Fools, and the Cowans were much concerned about his going on the road again.[44]

For a number of years, he had been very cheerfully making preparations for his death. In 1933, he had established a small trust fund for the two daughters of his brother, Edward Gillette, the only survivors of his immediate family. He had chosen the son of his dead friend and cousin, Joseph Hooker, as his executor, and had given him instructions on the funeral. Gillette wanted to be cremated at "cut rates" and directed that there should be "no funeral exercises of a religious nature done over my dead body." He said that he would not find it objectionable if some one cared to "say a

few words at the burial of a strictly non-religious nature that might help in the general celebration."[45]

In December 1936, he was in Hartford Hospital and asking his niece in Iowa "to sit quietly at home and feel beautifully anxious about me" if he became seriously ill. He recovered and asked Joseph Hooker to send chocolates to the nurses for him but was hospitalized in the same place again in Spring 1937.[46]

On April 29, 1937, William Gillette died of a pulmonary hemorrhage in Hartford Hospital. The Cowans and Osaki were taking care of his beloved "Seventh Sister" in Hadlyme and he was alone when he died. He was buried beside his wife in the family plot at Farmington.[47]

Gillette's death brought long obituaries in American and English newspapers and there were numerous editorials paying tribute to him as an actor and as a man. Many mentioned his "lovableness," his integrity as a gentleman, and his perpetual youth in addition to his contributions to the stage. His most fitting epitaph was, perhaps, these lines written after his death by Richard Burton, the friend of his boyhood:

> Sleep well, dear Lad--yes still to me
> You are a lad of eighty-three!
> Of all the lads beneath the sun
> The most to be depended on.[48]

C H A P T E R X

POSTSCRIPT

For thousands upon thousands of middle class spectators in the last years of the nineteenth century, the tall, slender figure of William Gillette possessed a powerful fascination. When he returned in twentieth century revivals, he still had nostalgic appeal for survivors of the Gilded Age. What happened to Gillette and his plays after his death?[1]

When he died in 1937, Gillette left a will expressing the hope that no "blithering saphead" would succeed to his beloved rock home, beautiful grounds, and railroad at Hadlyme, Connecticut. Should he find himself "doomed after death to a continued consciousness of the behavior of mankind on this planet . . .," the actor said that he would consider it "more than unfortunate" to find his property in the possession of "a person unfitted by nature" to appreciate it. Frederic Dorr Steele, the illustrator who used Gillette as his model of Sherlock Holmes, called these the words not of "a grudging curmudgeon" but of "a sensitive man who loved his life and was sorry to leave it."[2]

With the exception of a few bequests and life use of part of the grounds for Osaki, Gillette's estate went

in three equal parts to the two daughters of his brother, Edward, and to survivors of his long-dead wife, the Hall Cowans. At the time of his death, he had only some $40,000 in cash and securities and he realized that his heirs must sell the property.[3]

In 1937, a theatrical castle built around a single star was of little use to a buyer when the star was gone.[4]

With the aid of private contributions, the State of Connecticut finally bought the property for $30,000 in 1943. The railroad Gillette had loved went to an amusement park at Lake Compounce, Connecticut.[5]

The state has opened the Castle and its grounds as a park and is collecting memorabilia of the actor in his former home. He plays there now to some 200,000 spectators a year. His railroad is still running and more than 100,000 adults and children have shared his enjoyment of it since his death.[6]

His earlier mountain home in Tryon, N. C., has become The Thousand Pines Inn, with an exhibit featuring William Gillette.[7]

On the grounds of his childhood home at Nook Farm in Hartford, the Stowe-Day Foundation has collected Gillette's own scripts of his plays. The Foundation has also collected some of his letters, although he gave

Hall Cowan, his literary executor, instructions to destroy any private papers which remained in his own possession at his death.[8]

Some of the plays have had a surprising continued nostalgic life. A copy of Secret Service is available in a standard anthology of American drama. In New York City, there have been revivals since Gillette's death of All the Comforts of Home and Too Much Johnson. His Sherlock Holmes played at Peterborough, New Hampshire, in Summer 1973. In January 1974, it was performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company and was a hit of the London season again.[9]

Few of his nineteenth century spectators remain, but Gillette continues his career as an entertainer. After Gillette died, an editorial writer said, "The name of William Gillette was so associated with pleasure and good spirit that even at his death it is hard to put on the black veil of mourning." He was "a delight," the writer added, and his spectators "always will smile at the memory of him."[10]

FOOTNOTES

CHAPTER I

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[4]John Hooker, Some Reminiscences of a Long Life (Hartford: Belknap & Warfield, 1899), 9-10.

[5]Charles W. Burpee, The History of Hartford County (3 vols.; Chicago, Hartford, Boston: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1928), I, 451-52; John Hooker, Reminiscences, 170, 222-25, 2.

[6]Joseph S. Van Why, Nook Farm (Hartford: The Stowe, Beecher, Hooker, Seymour, Day Foundation, 1962), 34.

[7]Hartford Courant, April 5, 1854, 2, May 18, 1854, 2, May 19, 1854, 2, May 20, 1854, 2; Hartford Times,

May 18, 1854; U. S., Congressional Globe, 33rd Cong., 1st Sess., Vol. XXVIII, Part 3, July 16, 1854, 1617, 2d. Sess., Vol. XXX, Jan. 11, 1855, 237-38, 2d. Sess., Vol. XXXI, Feb. 23, 1855, 227-34 (remarks of Senator Francis Gillette).

[8]Francis Gillette to John Hooker, July 5, 1857; Burpee, Hartford County, I, 451-52, 461; Map of Nook Farm, Stowe-Day Foundation; Burpee, Hartford County, I, 465; visit to John Hooker house, still standing on Forest St., Hartford, Nov. 28, 1972; Isabella Beecher Hooker to John Hooker, May 20, 1853, and to Alice Hooker Day, Sept. 3, 1853 and Oct. 25, 1853 (Stowe-Day Foundation).

[9]Francis Gillette to John Hooker, July 5, 1857 (Stowe-Day Foundation); Hartford Courant, Oct. 1, 1879, 2.

[10]John Hooker, Reminiscences, 170-71; Francis Gillette to John Hooker, July 5, 1857 (Stowe-Day Foundation).

[11]Elisabeth Hooker Gillette to John Hooker, April 23, 1857, Isabella Beecher Hooker to John Hooker, April 23, 1857, May 16, 1857, Elisabeth G. Warner to William Gillette, April 21, 1865, Elisabeth G. Warner to Elisabeth Hooker Gillette, May 3, 1864, Francis Gillette to Elisabeth Hooker Gillette, June 7, 1858 (Stowe-Day Foundation).

[12]James D. Hart, The Popular Book. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 133-34; Francis Gillette to Elisabeth Hooker Gillette, May 28, 1838, July 25, 1849 (Stowe-Day Foundation).

[13]Hartford Courant, Dec. 18, 1893, 5; Elisabeth Hooker Gillette to Elisabeth G. Warner, January-September, 1870; Elisabeth G. Warner to Eliza Daggett Hooker, July 10, 1865; William Hooker Gillette to Elisabeth Hooker Gillette, June 30, 1887, Feb. 16, 1883, March 18, 1883, Dec. 27, 1883, Jan. 19, 1888 (Stowe-Day Foundation).

[14]Hartford Courant, Oct. 1, 1879, 2; John Hooker Reminiscences, 343; Memorial to Robert Hooker Gillette with a discourse delivered Jan. 29, 1865, by Nathanial J. Burton and appendix including correspondence by Robert Hooker Gillette (Hartford: Published by Request, 1865), copy available in Hartford Public Library; Edward H. Gillette to Francis Gillette, May 6, 1863, and to Elisabeth G. Warner, Oct. 27 [1866], Elisabeth G.

Warner to Mr. and Mrs. Francis Gillette, Jan. 20, 1865 (Stowe-Day Foundation).

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[16]Elisabeth G. Warner to William Gillette, April 21, 1865, Edward Beecher Hooker to Isabella Beecher Hooker, June 13-17, 1860 (Stowe-Day Foundation); Richard Burton, "William Gillette," The Book Buyer, XVI (February, 1898), 27; Isabella Beecher Hooker to Alice Hooker Day [April, 1857] (Stowe-Day Foundation).

[17]John Hooker, Reminiscences, 170-71.

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[20]Andrews, Nook Farm, 1-8.

[21]Francis Gillette to Abigail Thompson, Dec. 19, 1834, March 15, 1842 (Stowe-Day Foundation).

[22]Atwood Collins, reminiscences on founding of Asylum Hill Congregational Church, Hartford Courant, March 24, 1915, 16; Andrews, Nook Farm, 100-101; Lillian Mansfield, The History of the Asylum Hill Congregational Church (Hartford: Connecticut Printers, Incorporated, 1965), 4, 20, 26.

[23]Horatio T. Strother, The Underground Railway in Connecticut (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1962), 143; Clark, "The Press," in Hartford

County, ed. by Trumbull, I, 606-11; Hartford Courant, Oct. 1, 1879, 2.

[24]Atwood Collins, reminiscences on founding of Asylum Hill Congregational Church, Hartford Courant, March 24, 1915, 16; Rohan, Yankee Arms Maker, 242; Memorial to Robert Hooker Gillette.

[25]Papers on purchase of interest in American Emigrant Company, filed under "Andrew G. Hammond," Isabella Beecher Hooker Collection, Stowe-Day Foundation; Edward Hooker Gillette to "Dear friends at home," May 18, 1863 (Stowe-Day Foundation).

[26]Elisabeth G. Warner to Mr. and Mrs. Francis Gillette, Jan. 20, 1865 (Stowe-Day Foundation); Elisabeth G. Warner to Elisabeth Hooker Gillette, May 3, 1864, and Feb. 27, 1865, and to "Willy dear," April 21 and 26, 1865 (Stowe-Day Foundation).

[27]Photograph of William Gillette at the age of eleven, Gillette State Castle, Hadlyme, Connecticut (third floor exhibit rooms).

[28]Burpee, Hartford County, "Edward Beecher Hooker, M.D.," III, 458-59; Robert Allen to Isabella Beecher Hooker, June 13-17, 1860; Edward Beecher Hooker to Robert Allen, May 14, 1862 (Stowe-Day Foundation); Edward Beecher Hooker to Isabella Beecher Hooker, childhood letters in the possession of Joseph K. Hooker, Woodside Circle, Hartford; John Hooker children's sketchbook (Stowe-Day Foundation); Elisabeth Hooker Gillette to Mr. and Mrs. George Warner, May 5, 1870 (Stowe-Day Foundation).

[29]Memorial to Robert Hooker Gillette; Randall and Donald, Civil War, 453, 523; Memorial.

[30]Scripts of Held by the Enemy and Secret Service (Stowe-Day Foundation).

[31]Francis Gillette to Elisabeth G. Warner, Sept. 20, 1866; Edward Hooker Gillette to Elisabeth G. Warner, Oct. 27, /1867/; Edward Beecher Hooker to Robert Allen, Nov. 17, 1867; Elisabeth Hooker Gillette to Elisabeth G. Warner, July 1, 1870 (Stowe-Day Foundation); Will and Inventory of the Estate of Francis Gillette, Hartford Probate Court Records, Connecticut State Library, Hartford, Conn.

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[33]Hail Columbia, June, 1866-Oct., 1867 (Stowe-Day Foundation).

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[35]Elisabeth Hooker Gillette to Mr. and Mrs. George H. Warner, May 5, 1870; William Gillette to Mr. and Mrs. George H. Warner, April 26, 1870 (Stowe-Day Foundation).

[36]William Gillette to Mr. and Mrs. George H. Warner, April 26, 1870 (Stowe-Day Foundation); Doris Cook, "The Library of William Gillette," Bulletin of Bibliography, XXII (Jan.-Apr., 1958), No. 373; William Gillette to "Fred," July 3, 1873 (Stowe-Day Foundation).

[37]Richard Burton, "William Gillette," The Book Buyer, XVI (February, 1898), 26.

[38]Edward Beecher Hooker to Robert Allen, Dec. 31, 1869 (Stowe-Day Foundation); Edward Beecher Hooker to Isabella Beecher Hooker, letters in possession of Joseph K. Hooker, Woodside Circle, Hartford.

[39]Elisabeth Hooker Gillette to Mr. and Mrs. George H. Warner, undated [1870?] (Stowe-Day Foundation); Hartford Courant, Feb. 11, 1930, 17.

[40]Broadside for performance of "Bullywingle" and "Lord Dundreary" at church sociable, Sigourney St. hall, Hartford, March 19, 1973 (Stowe-Day Foundation); Dictionary of American Biography, "Edward A. Sothern," XVII, 400-01.

[41]New York Times, Nov. 1, 1914, Sec. 5, 8.

[42]Facsimile of program of Class Sociable, Hartford Public High School, March 11, 1872 (Stowe-Day Foundation); Catalogue of the Hartford Public High School, Tercentenary Edition, 173, 11; Lucy S. Williams Collection of Hartford Public High School reports and Composition Books, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford; Hartford Courant, April 26, 1873, 2.

[43]Catalogue of the Hartford Public High School, Tercentenary Edition, 11; Richard Burton, "William Gillette," The Book Buyer, XVI, 27; William Gillette to Elisabeth G. Warner, April 26, 1870 (Stowe-Day Foundation).

[44]New York Times, Nov. 1, 1914, Sec. 5, 8.

[45]New York Times, Nov. 1, 1914, Sec. 5, 8.

[46]New York Times, Nov. 1, 1914, Sec. 5, 8.

[47]New York Times, Nov. 1, 1914, Sec. 5, 8.

[48]Elisabeth G. Warner to George H. Warner, April 24, 1873 (Stowe-Day Foundation); Hartford Courant, Apr. 26, 1873, 2.

[49]Richard Duffy, "Gillette, Actor and Playwright," Ainslee's Magazine, VI (August, 1900), 55; Doris E. Cook, Sherlock Holmes and Much More (Hartford: The Connecticut Historical Society, 1970), 93; Lloyd Morris, Curtain Time (New York: Random House, 1953), 279.

FOOTNOTES

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CHAPTER IX

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[12]Photographs of Castle as it was during Gillette's residence there, Van Name, Gillette Castle and Castle exhibits; Visits, 1972-73.

[13]Photographs of the Castle and the building, which still has much of Gillette's original furniture.

[14]Gillette Castle.

[15]William Gillette to Dr. Edward Beecher Hooker, Jan. 31, 1923 (Stowe-Day Foundation); Van Name, Gillette Castle; Mrs. Dorothy Durfee, interview, Sept. 30, 1972; Ruth Guthrie Burton, Three Parts Scotch (Indianapolis, Ind.: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1946), 161-67.

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[7]Visit to The Thousand Pines Inn, Tryon, N. C., and interview with Miss Selina Lewis, now the owner, May 16-17, 1973.

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Victoria and Albert Museum, Enthoven Theatre Collection, London.
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William Gillette Scripts, Publications, Scrapbooks, Memorabilia

Connecticut State Library, Hartford, Conn.
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Correspondence with Douglas S. Whyte, Windsor, Ontario, Aug. 6 and Sept. 19, 1973.